

10 to 1 - iraqimemorial.org

Curatorial Essay: Joseph DeLappe

iraqimemorial.org on view at EFA Project Space September 9 – October 22, 2011

The purpose of this project is to honor and commemorate the deaths of thousands of civilians killed since the commencement of "Operation Iraqi Freedom" on March 19, 2003; to establish an Internet archive as a living memorial that will serve as a repository of memorial concepts; to mobilize an international community of artists to contribute proposals that will represent a collective expression of memory, unity and peace; to encourage the vigilance of contemporary memory in a time of war; to stimulate an understanding of the consequences and costs of "the war on terror"; to support the moral imperative of recognizing the deaths of Iraqi civilians; and to create a context for the initiation of a process of symbolic, creative atonement.

– *iraqimemorial.org Mission Statement*

The invasion of Iraq commenced on March 19th, 2003, a year and a half after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. "Operation Iraqi Freedom" was propagated and enacted by the Bush administration and eagerly embraced by a majority of the American public, 70% of whom believed, in a 2003 USA Today poll¹, that Saddam Hussein was involved in the attacks of 9/11.

In February of 2004 the World Trade Center Site Memorial web site was published. This site features all 5,201 proposals submitted to "Remember and honor the thousands of innocent men, women, and children murdered by terrorists in the horrific attacks of February 26, 1993 and September 11, 2001." The development of a freely accessible database cataloguing the thousands of entries received from throughout the world was indeed impressive. Yet, I was deeply troubled by the larger context within which this memorial process, this remembering our own dead, was functioning – specifically in regard to the then nascent invasion of Iraq. The signs that the liberation would be a "cake walk"² and that we would be welcomed with open arms had, by this time, deteriorated into a growing insurgency. The death toll of soldiers and civilians alike was rising, with the latter suffering in ever greater, yet unknown or unrecognized numbers. At the time of the publication online of the WTC proposals in February of 2004, the numbers of civilian dead in Iraq had already far exceeded those killed by the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Here we were, in the process of carefully and respectfully working to remember and honor the innocents of 9/11 while simultaneously thousands of people, arguably just as innocent, were being killed in order for us to "fight terrorism", "protect our freedoms", and "spread democracy abroad". I wondered if there would ever be this type of international competition for a memorial to the many thousands of Iraqi civilians who were the "collateral damage" of our invasion. At the time of the

¹ "Poll: 70% believe Saddam, 9-11 link", *USA Today*, http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2003-09-06-poll-iraq_x.htm

² Adelman, Ken, "Cakewalk in Iraq", *The Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A1996-2002Feb12?language=printer>

publication of the WTC Memorial Competition website, it has been estimated that there were approximately 25,000 civilian casualties in Iraq.³

It was within this context that the idea to create iraqimemorial.org was born.

Who is remembered? Who is mourned? Who is responsible? How do we, as artists, choose to respond?

Iraqimemorial.org exists to invite artists, designers, architects, musicians, dancers and other creative individuals or groups from all over the world to propose memorials to the victims of a war who will likely never be recognized through official processes. The submitted proposals may never be realized - the intent is to facilitate a process that allows for the expression of concepts as a collective, networked, creative act of remembrance that takes place in the present tense.

Memorials exist for a variety of reasons: to create an opportunity for the contemplation of loss; to honor sacrifice; to celebrate heroism and to consecrate a process of mourning that is ongoing and public. This call for proposals for memorials to the thousands of innocents killed in Iraq is an effort to establish an opportunity for the creative community to conceptualize works that seek to recognize, reveal, and process the true cost of this war. The value lies in the recognition of death and suffering in the immediate - remembering the present and calling attention to the continuing horror that is being bestowed upon the civilian population of Iraq.

10 to 1. This is the ratio of civilian to military casualties in modern warfare as determined by a 2001 study by the International Committee of the Red Cross.⁴ Since the coalition forces, led by the United States, invaded Iraq under the auspices of “Operation Iraqi Freedom” in 2003, the accurate accounting for the devastation of the civilian population of Iraq has been controversial and conflicting to say the least.⁵ In 2002, at a press conference after the invasion of Afghanistan, General Tommy Franks infamously stated, “We don’t do body counts.” This policy apparently extended to the war in Iraq. As of 2011, estimates run from 100,000 to over 1.2 million⁶ deaths in Iraq of non-combatants.

Ideation:

In 2004, I began to research the nature of contemporary war memorials and monuments. Between 2004-2007, I approached the idea from a number of different directions while at the same time engaged in a related work of memorial and protest, the “dead-in-iraq” intervention in the America’s Army computer game, commenced in 2006. This project was also first inspired by my consideration of the WTC Memorial Site Competition although, unlike the iraqimemorial.org project, “dead-in-

³ “Casualties of the Iraq War”, *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties_of_the_Iraq_War

⁴ “U.S. Quietly Issues Estimate of Iraqi Civilian Casualties”, *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/30/international/middleeast/30civilians.html?pagewanted=print>

⁵ Thieren, Michel, “Deaths in Iraq: How Many, and Why it Matters”, *Open Democracy*, http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-iraq/iraq_deaths_4011.jsp

⁶ “Casualties of the Iraq War”, *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties_of_the_Iraq_War

iraq” was intentionally focused on the issue of American military casualties. Interestingly I found myself often challenged by critics of the “dead-in-iraq” intervention for my intentional focus on military deaths. I assured these individuals that a project to address the issue of civilian casualties in Iraq was in the developmental stages.

The original conception of iraqimemorial.org went through several iterations. My first thoughts went towards a purely interventionist strategy: to essentially copy the exact design of the WTC memorial site - replacing all the content with text and proposals collected through a DIY international call for proposals for memorials to the innocents of Iraq. Repurposing the WTC memorial process by reifying the site to address the issue of memorializing the victims of our invasion of Iraq.

I abandoned this idea rather quickly as the creation of such a purely hacktivist gesture, while intriguing, would have been too easy - in fact, doing so would likely have been a hollow action that would be both an insult to the victims of 9/11 and be a less than honorable tribute to the casualties of the Iraq war. Inevitably such temporary appropriations of significant cultural artifacts with new or critical content inevitably preserves some aspect of the power relationship one may seek to question through such appropriative actions.

I decided instead to create a project that is at once inspired by the WTC Memorial website yet completely distinct. The issue at hand, the deaths of many thousands of innocent civilians in our war of choice, is far too significant to simply create a project in the form of a reactionary gesture. In the end, I sincerely hoped to do two, rather contradictory things with iraqimemorial.com: critique our overwhelming predilection towards memorializing our own victims whilst victims of our actions remain unrecognized and largely forgotten, and as a corrective, creative space where people could share memorial ideas dedicated to the human cost of the war in Iraq.

The Virtualization of Memory:

The original concept behind the iraqimemorial.org process was to create a process of entry and review by two panels of jurors, yet there would be no “winner” of the competition - this was an intentionally open-ended competition without the promise of any physical realization. The jurors were invited solely to select and rate up to ten proposals that they found to be of interest. The fact that these memorial concepts would never be realized was central to the critical intent and ideation of the overall project. As a speculative competition, the virtual representation of memorial ideas would serve to magnify the negligent lack of consideration of the civilian victims of the war in Iraq by the very absence of the realization of the proposed memorials.

Participants were encouraged to develop proposals by a broadly stated criteria for entries:

This project seeks to highlight conceptions of memorials in the broadest context possible. From individual gestures of personal remembrance to monumental concepts functioning on a global scale - all ideations of memory that address the issue of Iraqi civilian deaths are welcome. From sketches on napkins to fully detailed digitally animated walkthroughs - the diversity of approaches to expressing your ideas will help to create an engaging and thought provoking repository of memorial concepts.

Of the 180 plus submissions to iraqimemorial.org, there are identifiable themes and approaches that have emerged over time. These categories could be loosely considered to include: the creation of monumental architecture; interventions upon existing monuments; durational works of art making

involving the marking/recording of deaths; utilizations of locative media to break down our physical and psychological disconnect from the carnage of war; performative interventions; to time based works to highly speculative nigh impossible projects.

It has been said that the American public has been largely untouched by the war in Iraq. The vast majority of the population have not been asked to sacrifice or, for that matter, pay for the cost of this war, now estimated at just under 800 billion dollars.⁷ That we neither know or are particularly interested in knowing about the actual numbers of civilian casualties in Iraq, while at the same time stridently seeking to memorialize our own, seems perhaps either a testament to the brutality of war or the necessity for a public to psychologically shut down in the face of such unfathomable carnage. The individuals who have participated in iraqimemorial.org have, in some way, set out to break through this psychological barrier. Their work is a call to take responsibility, to recognize the humanity of those we have died and to validate the memory of the distant other.

Selected proposals recognized by the juror's review processes (2008 & 2009) and those selected by project director Joseph DeLappe are featured in this exhibition.

2008 First Juror's Review

Yaelle Amir, independent curator, New York City
Dr. Bernadette Buckley, Goldsmiths University, London, UK
Monica Narula & Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Raqs Media Collective, India
Dr. David Simpson, University of California, Davis
John Spiak, Curator, Arizona State University Art Museum, AZ
Dr. Marjorie Vecchio, Director, Sheppard Fine Arts Gallery, UNR, Reno, NV

2009 Second Juror's Review

Muhammed Abdulla, artist, United Kingdom
Cassandra Coblenz, Curator, Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, AZ
Julian Hunt, Architect, Hunt/Laud Studio, Washington, DC
Ann Wolfe, Curator, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, NV
Raul Zamudio, Independent Curator and Critic, New York City

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About the curator:

Joseph DeLappe is a Professor of the Department of Art at the University of Nevada where he directs the Digital Media program. Working with electronic and new media since 1983, his work in online gaming performance and electromechanical installation have been shown throughout the United States and abroad. In 2006 he began a project: dead-in-iraq, to type consecutively, all names of America's military casualties from the war in Iraq into the America's Army first person shooter online recruiting game. He has lectured throughout the world regarding his work, including most recently at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. He has been interviewed on CNN, NPR, CBC, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and on The Rachel Maddow Show on Air America Radio. His works have been featured in the New York Times, The Australian Morning Herald,

⁷ "Cost of War", <http://costofwar.com/en/>

Artweek, Art in American and in the 2010 book from Routledge entitled Joystick Soldiers The Politics of Play in Military Video Game.

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