THE 'SUCCESS' OF THE WAR IN IRAQ IS DUBIOUS BUT CHECK THE RECENT FAILINGS REMARKED BY THE MEDIA: OF PEACE; OF JUSTICE; OF DEMOCRACY; OF WEAPONS INSPECTIONS; OF THE UNITED NATIONS; OF INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY; OF AID; OF MULTILATERAL AGREEMENTS. BUT WHAT OF ART?

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAILING

STUART KOOP

In Melbourne, the proposal to veil certain works on public display in protest against the war in Iraq revealed more than it hid. The strategy suggested that art can be effective, but oddly, only through its disappearance, by denying people the pleasure of looking at it.[1] It's a curious proposal, which revealed the apolitical nature of most art and its real affinity with the entertainment industry [since if art were to communicate any sentiment relevant to the issue of war/peace, why cover it up at this moment?]

An interesting counterpoint to this local proposal lay in the placement of a blue curtain over a tapestry of Picasso's *Guernica* outside the UN Security Council chambers in New York since it was thought to be an inappropriate background for media briefings regarding the war, and thus US Secretary of State Colin Powell was spared the embarrassment of posing for photos in front of what is arguably the most celebrated artwork depicting the atrocities of war.

An exhibition that sounded more affirmative on the issue of art and social engagement ran co-incidentally with the war – *Feedback: Art, Social Consciousness and Resistance*, at the Monash University Museum of Art. But the show was less about political efficacy than the dissipation of social issues into the formal and personal concerns of artists, whether aesthetic renderings of statistical data by Luisa Bufardeci or reworked images of terror into kid's illustrations by Sylvia Velez. The relation between 'world events and individual experience' seemed to be problematic in most cases rather than effective, figured most clearly in Raquel Ormella's hand crafted *faux* protest banners flying super-banal, self-centred slogans such as 'I'm worried I'm not political enough'. For *The Age* art critic too, the art in *Feedback*... failed to be political; after all, 'Political art isn't easy to do'.[2]

Though these banners would probably never see the light of day, they did bring to mind the placards hoisted a few years back by the Pedagogical Vehicle Project [PVP] at a Mayday march against globalisation in Melbourne. PVP [an elective at Victorian College of the Arts run by Callum Morton and Danius Kesminas, centered on an old ice cream van which was purchased with a view to mobilising students' engagement with social events going on in the city around them. The grous's activities were usually based around driving the van to a public event and providing some dubious free service.

At the Mayday march, PVP mingled with left alliance socialist collectives, environmental groups and trade unions. They wore white lab coats, held blank placards, and distributed cookies from the van. Media reaction, indeed, the front page of *The Age*, reported their empty banners as indicative of a generation who want to protest anything. However, rather than saying nothing, I reckon the placards eloquently put the question of what artists could say amidst so many other urgent social messages regarding inequity, environmental degradation and exploitative work practices. Precisely what does art contribute to this retinue of social concerns? And while the presentation of blank placards might indicate the failure of protest art, it surely also expresses a continuing longing for social engagement.

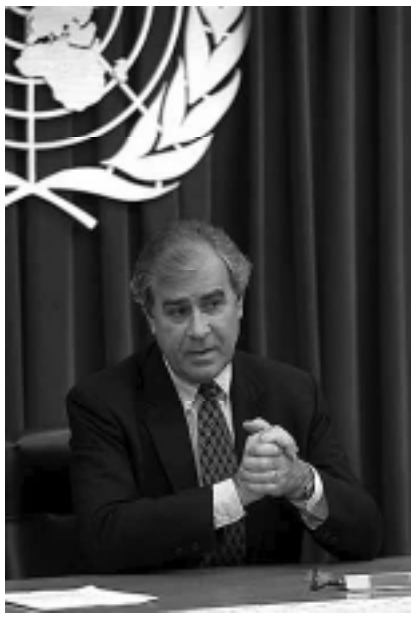
So, to remark these failings is not really a criticism, since art regularly fails. The best intentions do go awry beyond the studio or beyond the gallery. An artist's failure can be profound, and it can even be purposeful. And in failing art might yet be effective since the myriad reasons why it fails are often instructive.

When I saw Hans Blix on the TV, disconsolately walk away from camera, having failed – according to the media – to convince the USA of sufficient progress in Iraq's disarmament, and having failed to find weapons of mass destruction, I felt an urgent need to redefine failure. Weapons inspectors and artists do fail, and in failing they sometimes also succeed, bringing to light the machinations engulfing them, reflecting the whole story unfolding around them, in which their own small will is irrelevant, except to indicate the massive scale of passing historical events.

Here's a topical example. While an Australia Council artist-in-residence at PS1 in New York in 1998–99, Deborah Ostrow devised a work for her exhibition opening to be held on 7 February 1999. Against the background of Iraq/USA brinkmanship over continuing disarmament, Ostrow planned Richard Butler, head of the United Nations Special Committee [UNSCOM] inspecting Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction, to read aloud a poem by the twelfth century Sufi poet, Jelaluddin Rumi, standing on the steps in front of the main entrance to the building.

Ostrow, like many artists, had been increasingly interested in working beyond the gallery, making links between the artworld and the real world beyond. Her recent works had included setting up a Japanese tea room in the gallery, or providing gallery visitors with direct telephone access to prominent charities, or working with local graffiti artists on a gallery wall-painting. Ostrow met Butler a few months earlier, soon after arriving in New York in October 1998, at a private party for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. A week later she called Butler and explained her proposal. As a fan and reputed scholar of Rumi, Butler agreed. They simply had to settle on a text.

Butler has shown great interest and support for the arts. According to biographer Tania Ewing, he was introduced as a student to the theatre and literary crowd at Sydney University, which included Bruce Beresford, Robert Hughes, Germaine Greer, and Clive James[3]. While working in New York for the UN, he attended openings for Tracey Moffat and posed for portraits, including one by an Iraqi artist.



Opposite page: *Pedagogical Vehicle Project*, [Mayday protest, Melbourne], 2000 Photo courtesy Stuart Koop
Left: Richard Butler, Executive Chairman, United Nations Special Commission Head of weapons inspection team Iraq
Right: Deborah Ostrow, *Flygirl [search and rescue mission]* [video stills], 1999 Photos courtesy the artist and Clocktower Gallery, New York
Bottom: *The Age,* 20 February, 1999

Ostrow faxed Butler some poems, suggesting one in particular, 'In Baghdad, Dreaming of Cairo: In Cairo, Dreaming of Baghdad'. As the title implies, the poem is about searching for fulfilment and longing for another place; two themes which surely entwine the work of an international weapons inspector. Rumi concludes of enlightenment:

> *So it came quietly*
> *to the seeker, though he didn't say it out loud,*
> *"What I'm longing for lived in my house in Baghdad!"*
> *He filled with joy. He breathed continuous praise.*
> *Finally he said,*
> *"The water of life is here.*
> *I'm drinking it. But I had to come*
> *this long way to know it!"*

Between Butler's agreement to read and the actual recitation a series of calamitous events unfolded. Part-way through delivering his final report to the UN in New York on 14 December 1999, detailing Iraq's non-compliance with UN resolutions, American planes commenced their attack in Operation Desert Fox. At that same session, Butler was accused by Russian Ambassador, Sergey Lavrov, of lying and spying for the USA Government; Butler's critical report on Iraq seemed to support USA military aggression. Furthermore, one of Butler's chief inspectors, Scott Ritter, had been alleging CIA infiltration of UNSCOM and that Butler was working for the USA Government. By other accounts, Monica Lewinsky had more to do with the attack on Iraq than Richard Butler [the US President was about to be impeached]. But irrespective of the truth of these and other claims, Butler was discredited and UNSCOM severely undermined.

Meanwhile, Butler was scheduled to perform on 7 February at the gala opening of the year for PS1, with several exhibitions opening alongside Ostrow's, including a survey of minimalist sculptor Ronald Bladen. PS1 publicists were working overtime. Large crowds were expected and Butler's celebrity in the USA had also sparked enormous media interest in the performance with previews and even cartoons appearing in a range of publications including *Washington Post* and *The Age*.

The Butler does it

Richard Butler, the scourge of Baghdad, must be trying to build bridges in the East if a forthcoming poetry recital is any indication. Washington journalists have been invited to a soiree with the tough-talking Butler at which he will read a selection of poetry "by the mystic Persian poet Jalaluddin Rumi", reports the *Washington Post*. The recital, to be held on Sunday in Long Island City, will be a like part of Butler's recent actions – "potentially charged with political meaning". We're assured the performance "combines Butler's role as a public figure representative of the West and the rational world, with the writing of Rumi, a 13th-century mystic poet connected to the great Eastern religious. At the same time, the performance is intended as a quiet work about Butler as an ordinary person who is himself a scholar of Rumi's poetry."

Organisers say the most unexpected performance "evolved organically" from a conversation between Butler and Australian artist **Deborah Ostrow**, who met at the recent Australian Symphony Orchestra party at which Butler bumped into Sydney Festival director **Leo Schofield** and bumped: "CLIVE! How are you?!" (Mean while, the most recent reference we can find to Ostrow's artistic endeavours is in Melbourne last year, when she was one of nine artists inviting the public to "view their private parts".)

~Ode to a Lunatic~
There once was a Fellow called Saddam
Whose weapons were those of a madman
He says we were spying!
We deny it was lying—
We always knew Saddam had 'em.

ll singing, all dancing clever Dick

o to Web site http://www.theplace.g.uk/html/nav/alfr.htm and you could the same prancing dilettante we're talking about here. Dicky's namesake

By Ostrow's design, the performance was to symbolically recombine East and West, linking a functionary of rational government with an esoteric Persian mystic. The pair were linked by a common though dissimilar experience of Baghdad, a point emphasised by Ostrow's choice of poem. Indeed, that Butler was to recite an ode to Baghdad so soon after its bombardment by the USA [and in which he may have unwittingly played a role] is quite incredible.

What a fabulous Gordian knot of events and circumstances, a real predicament, a knot that could really only be cut. And so Butler rang Ostrow the day before the PS1 opening, 6 February, and withdrew from the event. Sure enough, he cited his impending resignation from UNSCOM as the reason [made public only later in the year]; he wished no further confusion surrounding his role and allegiances. His particular concern, I guess characteristic of all diplomats, was how he would appear.

As I noted earlier, art is about how things appear [if they appear at all], it brings things to light, it flushes significance from the shadows, drawing profundity from the chiaroscuro of the everyday, as I think Henri Lefebvre once put it. So in this confabulation of political and cultural contexts, Ostrow's proposal did indeed bring things to a brink, precipitating an extraordinary possibility, held in store at this key moment in the recent past, which still resounds, and still amazes me. Using a poem, she held apart the massive pincers of history, for just a few seconds more, before they closed; no mean feat. Though Butler never read the poem, he was going to, and he did refuse. Ostrow's failure, Butler's knock-back, is then, *contra posito*, a subtle indictment of international diplomacy and national interests, just as the actual reading would have measured some degree of resolution.

Ostrow, of course, was devastated. She made a work soon after called *Flygirl*, in which she staged her own rescue by helicopter from the roof of PS1; a dramatic exit from the scene of her disgrace and so-called failure. But she has shown nothing since.

However, when we consider the whole story, indeed, when we retell it like this, we can appreciate the real work [or effort] of art; the object, the outcome, even the artist, are subordinate to the surrounding web of social relations which register their impact. These ripples in the real world are the best measure of efficacy in art, since it's only at the moment we relinquish the notion of art that we see its consequence in the world beyond. And which is why, in failing as artists, we sometimes succeed.

Butler could as well have agreed to read – and then not read – from another of Rumi's poems, this one called 'Desire and the Importance of Failing':

> *Failure is the key*
> *to the kingdom within.*
> *Your prayer should be, "Break the legs of what I want to happen. Humiliate my desire. Eat me like candy.*
> *It's spring, and finally*
> *I have no will."*

Notes
1. Gabriella Coslovich, 'Protest goes under cover', *The Age*, 20 February, 2003, *The Culture*: 4
2. Robert Nelson, 'Struggling to do political art well', *The Age*, 2 April, 2003, *The Culture*: 6
3. Tania Ewing, *The Peace Broker*, Macmillan, Sydney 2000