

## Douglas Tallack, "Art and Politics"

Picasso's *Guernica* (1937); the lyricism of Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 film, *Triumph of the Will*; the surprising enthusiasm for Abstract Expressionism covertly expressed by the CIA during the Cold War, even as, during the same decades, the Marxist Frankfurt School was promoting "difficult" Modernist art and literature as the source of radical politics; and, in comic vein, the scene in Wolfgang Becker's *Goodbye Lenin* (2003), when a statue of Lenin pointing firmly to the future is ingloriously hoisted up by a crane to traverse the cityscape of the former East Berlin. Equally, the genealogy and form of Ala Bashir's *The Union* exemplifies the entangling of art and politics, this time in Iraq since 1999. In that year one of Bashir's small sculptures became the prototype for a seven-storey monument to be constructed on a traffic island in al-Mansour in Baghdad (see figure 1)



Figure 1, Ala Bashir, *The Union*, Baghdad, 2001

As a piece of sculpture, shown in a 1992 exhibition, *Grains of Thought*, and, later, as a monument in Baghdad, sculpted by Mustafa Khakib, *The Union*, is, in Bashir's account,

an abstract form of a man and a woman ... . As most sculptures in Baghdad were about war or power, I thought *The Union* monument may inspire the new generation to think of love in an attempt to diminish the power of hate, which is widespread in the country, and is a source of sad events. (Interview with Ala Bashir in this Catalogue)

Saddam Hussein favoured representational art, usually with a military or governmental theme. Yet, when faced with the prototype and, then, again, in 2001, when Baath Party officials pointed out to Saddam that the half-completed monument did not obviously celebrate his leadership or any recent event, he did not object, and construction continued. Iraq was a secular state and therefore a male-female monument was permissible, though, in this respect, abstraction deflected what could have been a different kind of conservative public criticism. The monument's location, adjoining the highway leading out of Iraq and near a bus station for transit to Syria and Jordan prompted an interpretation that it symbolised the bond between Iraq and its neighbours.

*The Union's* nationalism is cultural and regional, rather than directly political. The surface is composed of 1640 Baathra stones (each weighing 400 pounds), as used by the Assyrians in Mesopotamia three thousand years ago. These stones were quarried in Mosul, yet many other Iraqi sculptors have chosen to work with materials from outside the region. In spite of its monumentalism – so often synonymous with all-powerful states – *The Union* also took root in the local area. Families came there from the poor district adjoining the traffic island. Bashir had objected to the proposal that the monument be fenced in and guarded from graffiti, understanding that a monument takes

on a life of its own. Of course, alongside the local meanings that come with everyday usage, *The Union* entered official mythology, first when Saddam's private secretary, Abed Hamoud Al-Tikriti, informed the artist that "You can call it *The Union*, but it symbolises the people embracing the President, not the union between man and woman", and, two years later, in 2003, when the Iraqi army took refuge there as the Americans converged on the city, and Saddam gave a defiant parting speech standing on an empty barrel. The official interpretation of Bashir's monument, if not of his original sculpture, ignored the theme of gender, as well as the artist's intention, and fastened either upon the idea of the President's union with his people or upon the suggestion in the work of two clasped hands, symbolising the unification of Arabs against the West, once the Gulf War had set Saddam on a course of action that had, hitherto, been less defined.

In February, the *Al-Mada* newspaper in Baghdad carried this report:

[The] Baghdad Governorate Council confirmed that the removal of Al-Leqaa and Arc de Triomphe monuments in the capital Baghdad comes under a plan to remove all the symbols of the former regime. The head of the Legal Committee at the Baghdad Provincial Council Sabbar Al-Saadi said in press statements that the instructions issued by the secretariat of the Council of Ministers provides for removal of most of the statues and symbols in Baghdad that are part of the remnants of the former regime.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2010, Ala Bashir's *The Union* was demolished (see figure 2).



Figure 2, Ala Bashir, *The Union* – Demolition (2010)

There are reports, including from Ala Bashir, that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was disconcerted by the destruction and sought to save the monument. Bashir received a telephone call from the Deputy Minister of Culture to the effect that the Ministry also knew nothing about the decision. A subsequent news story details the different positions already being taken in this latest episode in the continuing debate between aesthetics and politics:

"It is like they are deleting Iraq's history," laments Qasim Sebti, head of Iraq's artist union. True, Baghdad Mayor Sabri Issawi says, but not regrettable. The huge sculpture of crossed swords that arch over a military parade ground is next on the list, he says. "These were symbols of the brutality of the Baath, so it is reasonable that we would remove them," he said.

The demolition of works commissioned by Saddam's regime during his thirty years in power has caused a furore in the Iraqi artistic community. Artists say the government is destroying pieces of art that are not offensive. But many Iraqis, especially Shiites, believe anything involving the Baath Party is offensive. ... On the campaign trail, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has warned that the party is trying to make a comeback, and he has blamed Baath loyalists for bombings that killed hundreds of people in recent months.

Artists say the destruction campaign is being done to get votes. "This is nothing more than political propaganda," said Jabar Mahmoud, an art historian at the University of Baghdad.

Over the years, the U.S. military and Iraqis have destroyed many statues and portraits of Saddam, ubiquitous tributes to the dictator that filled Iraq's public spaces. Hours after Marines swept into eastern Baghdad during the invasion in 2003, Iraqis tied a rope around the neck of a giant statue of Saddam and pulled it down. Less obvious Baath-era artwork was left mostly untouched until recently, said Saad al-Basari, professor at the fine arts college at the University of Baghdad. ... "[*The Union*] was one of the first things a traveler would see upon arriving," al-Basari said. "When you saw the statue, you knew you were in Baghdad."

At Al Likaa Square, two soldiers guarding the demolition workers had mixed feelings. "It's a beautiful statue that I have always admired, but it's also a reminder of our difficult past," Mohamed Shaker said.

"It was a symbol of waste when Saddam built it during a time when Iraqis were suffering to even eat," Naros Ali Badr said. "Now, it's a symbol of waste, because the government should be paying attention to more important things." (see <http://www.wbirtv10.net/news/national/story.aspx?storyid=114031&catid=16>)

There is not a single statement in this litany, right through to one soldier's admiration for the beauty of art and the other's insistence that art hardly matters, that isn't highly provocative. As Walter Benjamin remarks in his seventh thesis on the philosophy of history "there is no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism."



Figure 3, Ala Bashir, *The Cry* – page from *The New Yorker*, 5<sup>th</sup> May, 2003.

But perhaps we learn most by turning to Ala Bashir's other public monument, *The Cry* (see figure 3), not least that in any conflict within a nation's borders there is sometimes a third party, in this case the United States and, most uncomfortably for many in this

country, its chief ally in Iraq, the United Kingdom. *The Cry* is a 27-foot bronze sculpture, selected by Saddam and the Governor of Baghdad, and, unlike *The Union*, still standing in Baghdad near the Amiryia shelter, where 420 women and children were killed in 1991. An American air-attack had been launched, based on intelligence that Saddam Hussein and his close supporters were in the shelter. Although a response to a specific outrage, *The Cry* shares, with many of Ala Bashir's sculptures and paintings the compelling and unforgettable image of soundless voices, whether trapped or imprisoned by war or their own government (see figure 4). Those voices have remained trapped or imprisoned throughout history and in art.



Figure 4, Ala Bashir, *The Victim* (2002).