# *WRECK*, Volume 2, no. 1:
# *(Re)Producing Power*



## *Foreword*

**By Geoffrey Carr**

UN Photo by Eskinder Debebe.

Fig. 1. View of replica tapestry of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, outside the Security Council chamber, UN Headquarters, New York.

Five years ago, as US forces poised to invade Iraq, the reproduction of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* hanging outside the United Nations Security Council Chamber was covered in anticipation of Secretary Of State Colin Powell's speech to that body. UN officials explained that the blue curtain would photograph better than the taupe and brown-hued tapestry.[1] But generally it was clear that figures of shrieking animals and anguished civilians did not provide a suitable backdrop for Powell's call to arms. The supreme irony of this 'cover up' was not lost on antiwar protesters, who gathered outside the UN holding aloft small copies of *Guernica*. Peter Goddard, art critic for the *Toronto Star*, concluded that "if there is a war with Iraq, there's already been the first casualty – art."[2] In a contrary mode, Elaine Goble's *Sacred Ground Zero* (2002), hanging in the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, seeks to shroud dissenting opinion by illustrating that which should forge

consensus: the reality of catastrophic violence and the need to protect those most vulnerable and dear. The emblazoned logos of the Gap, Hilfiger, and Cat, however, suggest a Frankenstinian irony. The role of the corporation coincidentally is sacralized and implicated, making visible the untamable semantic potency crouching in all representation. These two instances make clear the power of artworks (even reproductions) to operate as propaganda or weapons of critique.

On the other hand, a separate cluster of problems emerging from the over-circulation of 9-11 and Iraq war imagery causes great frustration for certain critics of visual culture. Nicholas Mirzoeff, in his study of the media's coverage of this conflict, uneasily eyes up this bewildering profusion of imagery. Though a vocal champion of reading, decoding, and unmasking the visual, Mirzoeff concedes that the sheer proliferation of Iraq war images, documenting events, such as urban car-bombings and the Abu Ghraib detainment camp abuses, now "resist the viewer".[3] This preponderance of visual culture, in Mirzoeff's view, creates signifiers that appear "hard, sharp-edged, and opaque, evading all forms of radar, physical and cultural".[4]

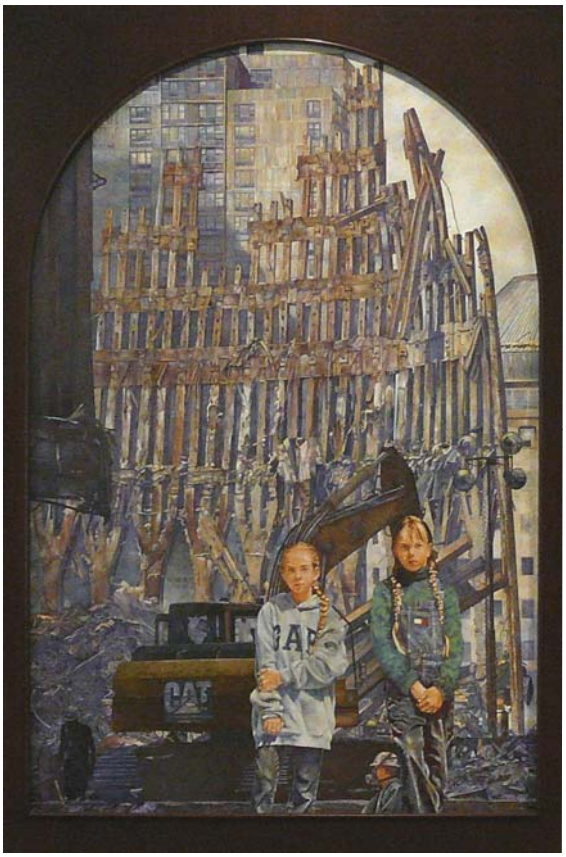


Photo by Geoffrey Carr.

Fig. 2. Elaine Goble, *Sacred Ground Zero*, 2002. Oil on canvas. Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

These examples reveal the multifarious nature of representation, at once threat and buttress to entrenched power. For this issue of *Wreck* we asked contributors to reflect upon how representations work to maintain, (re)produce, capture, or disrupt power, in relation to an essentially Foucauldian model: power as immanent, diffused throughout society on all levels, the means of attack and counterattack, oppression and subversion, didacticism and satire. In each essay that follows, the varied representations studied—street art, sexually explicit film, public large-scale photographic display—attempt to speak back to power, revealing both the degree of conflict in any such site of representation and yet also its contingency, its vulnerability to counter-bricolage, the imposition of new legal restrictions, or public indifference and misapprehension.

Tai van Toorn's "Rules of the Road: News Media, Street Art, and Crime" examines the street-level interventions of artist Peter Gibson, a.k.a. Roadsworth, whose ephemeral stenciled imagery playfully disrupted


Image at www.gizmodo.com/archives/images//iRAQsubway.jpg.

Fig. 3. Copper Greene, *Untitled*, 2004. Caption reads: "10,000 volts in your pocket, guilty or innocent."

the quotidian space of drivers and pedestrians in Montréal from 2001 to 2004. Gibson integrated satirical forms—surveillance cameras, velvet ropes, barbed wire, owls—into the mundane designs of road surface markings, not only cleverly critiquing the spatial practice of Montréalers, but also raising the ire of city officials and police, who launched an extensive investigation to discover Gibson's identity. In addition to considering the formal content of the Roadsworth stencils, van Toorn surveys contemporary theorizations of graffiti as well as the critical reception of Gibson's tactical *détournement* in the local media. Van Toorn maps the debates over the aesthetic merit or illegality of the Roadsworth images and, in the process, reveals the deeply contradictory nature of each position. Moreover, she demonstrates that although Gibson's work indeed did disrupt the orderly functioning of urban space, the conditions of his sentencing, which ordered that he produce new stenciled images for the city in approved places, sapped his art of its original criticality. This outcome is reminiscent of the tactical media work of Copper Greene, the group of anonymous New York artists who appropriated the widely-disseminated image of a hooded Abu Ghraib prisoner for use in a mock advertising campaign for the Apple Ipod. Though it garnered much attention, it neither changed the course of the war in Iraq nor slowed sales of the Ipod.

In her article "Freedom, Sex & Power: Film/Video Regulation in

Ontario," Taryn Sirove explores the "contact point" between the legislated definitions of indecent imagery, the transgressions by artists of those legal definitions, and the ways in which censorship, as a "technology of power", shapes and constitutes subjectivities. Sirove opens by contesting the claim made by the *Toronto Star* in 2004 that "Ontario is getting out of the censorship business". She argues to the contrary that the Ontario Film Review Board continues to exert censorious power, perhaps more so, by means of new licensing and reviewing fees, an oblique strategy that does not proffer an easy target for critics. Such legal sophistications emerge from over twenty years of confrontation between provincial censors on the one hand and, on the other, artists and filmmakers who have repeatedly evoked the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* to unseat decency laws in the name of freedom of expression. But, as Sirove problematizes, establishing exemptions on the basis of "artfulness" legitimizes and makes safe certain sexually explicit representations, in the process enervating their political message. That said, she also demonstrates that pornography does provide material crucial to art production: for example, the video work of Richard Fung, whose *Chinese Characters* (1986) exposes queer porn as a site of the construction of perceived submissive Asianness. For Sirove, the judicious use of censorship requires understanding that "coercion and constraint are necessarily always components of democratic systems and not just characteristics of totalitarianism". If censorship is openly regarded as a "technology of power", then the covert delegitimizing exclusions of the anti-censorship position are avoided.

Merrilee Wolsey examines two works by Montréal artist Geneviève Cadieux, who implicates both the visual and auditory senses. Wolsey considers the possibilities of voice and silence and their relation to the politics of language debates, sovereignty, and the lasting influence of the Catholic Church in Quebec. Through a careful reading of two Cadieux works, Wolsey reveals the fruitfulness of their ambiguity. As Wolsey demonstrates, *La voie lactée* (1992) and *Here Me With Your Eyes* (1989) compel an especially active interpretation that fuses the practices of seeing and listening. Though sound is typically regarded as outside the boundaries of visual art, Wolsey contends that in Cadieux's case, it is not a nonessential frame for or supplement to the work. Indeed, for Wolsey, a fuller comprehension of its political significance requires the integration of the visual and the auditory. But, as with the examples outlined by van Toorn and Sirove, the representative power of this art is similarly frayed—in this instance losing some critical force as a result of public indifference or unfamiliarity. This is also true for Cadieux's *La voie lactée*, situated atop the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. Despite its highly public placement and near-continual viewership, when polled, most passer-bys reported little or no knowledge of the piece or, for that matter, that it was an artwork and not a billboard. This example further affirms the fraught possibilities of

representation to intervene in the everyday functioning of socio-economic systems. While Cadieux's work does transgress entrenched norms, its potential to foment change is, however, significantly neutralized.

This conflictual, contingent state also characterizes the "representations" of scholars and students, to borrow Edward Said's term. As Said reminds us, intellectuals are "herded along by the mass politics of representation embodied by the information or media industry".[5] Resistance requires intellectuals to dispute "the images, official narratives, [and] justifications of power circulated by an increasingly powerful media".[6] But such contention demands an uneasy position between isolation and alignment, to be willing to be "embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant", in an era where the carrots for those in academia are tempting and all-too-real.[7]

**Notes:**

1. In 1985, following the repatriation of *Guernica* (1937) from New York's Museum of Modern Art to Spain four years prior, the estate of Nelson A. Rockefeller donated a tapestry, full-scale reproduction of *Guernica* to the United Nations.

2. Peter Goddard, "Anti-War Art Doesn't Fly at U.N.," *Toronto Star*, February 6, 2003.

3. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon : The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 2.

4. *Ibid*.

5. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (London: Vintage, 1994), 16

6. *Ibid*., 16

7. *Ibid*., 10.