NEW PROJECTS
**NEW INTERVIEWS/TEXTS**

**(un)Reality Television**
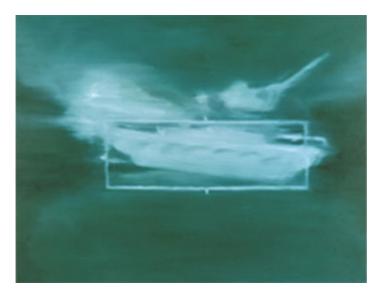
**by Benjamin Godsill**

What follows below is a slightly modified and shortened essay first written for a catalog accompanying the exhibition *Image War: Contesting Images of Political Violence* that I curated along with Tina Gregory, Katy Rogers and Susanne Ø. Sæther in the spring of 2006 as part of our participation in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program, 2005/06.

While the text concentrates on a particular exhibition (and three particular artists within that context) more it is also more broadly an examination of artistic practices that seek to locate radical political possibilities within a seemingly flat always on, always mediated culture. The words of the artist's collective Claire Fontaine neatly sum-up the basic tenants of this exploration which are "to open the question of the collective re-appropriation of the means of production of the present," (1) a present whose means and modes I would argue are overwhelmingly digital. This exploration and interest is part of a larger (and possibly too large) project of examining the recuperation of radical artistic possibilities from a space of decentralization that seems to be more paralyzing than freeing.

In their recent book *Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (2005), the activist collective Retort point to a contradiction in our current social and political moment. "Control over the image is now the key to social power," they write: it is primarily via images that ideologies are inscribed in subjects, yet it is at this very level that the state and the project of Empire are most vulnerable (2). The desire of the current regime to maintain its hegemonic power-- economic, social, and political--necessitates controlling the meaning of images, images that act ever increasingly as "the real" in lieu of the actualities they represent. This notion of images as "detached from every aspect of life" (3) of course evokes Guy Debord's notion of the spectacle as the organizing principle of our current social world. Debord argued that "all that was once directly lived has become mere representation," that discursive structures derived not from real events in real time and space but instead from their representation (4). It is in the discursive space of these representations—the spectacular—that many artists operate today. They are remixing digital spectacle out of necessity: one must address power in the language of power, for it is in the language and image of digital spectacle that hegemony is formed--and also where it is most vulnerable.

Mark Hansen writes that because "the digital image is an accumulation of …discontinuous fragments, each of which can be addressed independently of the whole, there is no longer anything materially linking the content of the image with its frame.(5)" It is this de-linking of images that denotes our present moment of spectacle, a

moment that is inscribed by -- and operates within-- the digital. Thanks to digital imaging, representations of violent conflict are often cleansed of real violence to real bodies: night vision, GPS, laser-guided bombs, and satellite imagery replace images of the violent destruction of actual bodies. Amid the actual obliteration of real bodies, war is waged on the level of the virtual and visual. As Retort formulates, the disconnection of images from systems of meaning-making increases their powers of social control; images acquire the ability to inscribe ideologies, ways of seeing the world, and viewpoints onto subjects when the gulf between the actual and the representation widens. With this growth, the ideological formulations supporting the construction, editing, broadcast, and reception of images increase in agency, as these functions connect image and event.

Joy Garnett's painting *Kill Box* (2001) acts to deconstruct the hegemonic links between image and event. Garnett remediates one of the many techno-fetishist visual representations of the first Gulf War, hand-painting a tank in the digital target area–or kill box--that (presumably) a pilot has used to launch the missile seen blowing it apart. Garnett's low-res style and palette loosely recalls the electronic green and ghostly white of the night vision technologies used by American forces in that conflict, whose images were then broadcast worldwide to signify American technological superiority. Representations of the Gulf War (a conflict that relied on digital technologies for both its execution and for the live feed of its images on global news) were overwhelmingly like the one in *Kill Box*. They were rendered from the point of view of machines that were designed and used to harm bodies, their night vision and infra-red points of view incapable of representing real physical bodies being destroyed yet masterful at creating cleansed, video-game-like war images to be beamed into living rooms.

Joy Garnett, *Kill Box* (2001), Oil on canvas, 38 x 48"
Courtesy the artist

Death in both Garnett's painting and the War's media representations, was represented as occurring at the level of the virtual, in the clean, digital box rendered on our television

screens, not on the ground at the level of the actual carnage. Removing the human body from war images, and substituting in its place images of technological marvel that bespeak the superiority of Empire, inscribes representations of political conflict in the digital spectacular. By recasting this technologized form of war and bodily destruction in the human hand with paint on canvas, Garnett uses the representational strategies of digital spectacle to reinsert the human in the destruction that spectacle hides. *Kill Box* operates within the spectacle, but in a counter-hegemonic manner, attempting to close the gap between the real pain and horror of death and its spectacular representation.

Like *Kill Box*, many of the work of this vein that interests me responds not only to the representations of war but also to the base material supports upon which the new digital superstructure of detached images is built and functions to serve. On the material level this work evinces what David Harvey calls a "new hegemonic formation of capitalism"-- neo-liberalism--rooted in resurgent rounds of dispossession and the accumulation of capital through force and other primitive modes. (6) It would be undesirable (and impossible) to dissociate these new modes of capital accumulation from the digital networks--and digital spectacle--that both result from and facilitate the era of Empire. Empire depends on digital technology not only to inscribe ideologies on subjects in the realm of spectacle, but also to use as a means of material accumulation; such technologies allow neo-liberal global capitalism to function. While digital technologies offer possibilities for a freer flow of information, the distributed networks that foster neo-liberalism's idealistic vision also permit capital's control—fiscal and military—over vast spatial arenas that exist everywhere and nowhere at once.(7)

Coco Fusco's installation *Delores From 10 to 10* (2001) documents (and, in some ways, reenacts and reactivates) a 2001 live performance and Internet broadcast by the artist and Ricardo Dominguez, and similarly acts to reclaim the human from its digitally spectacularized representation. The work comprises a small group of small black-and-white video monitors similar to those used for surveillance. On the screens are various silent video images with constantly changing angles and backgrounds, apparently taken from different cameras (again similar to video surveillance). The images vary from the horrific to the banal: a woman alone in an anonymous room apparently being berated by a much larger man; the same room empty; a different view of the room with the woman alone, looking forlorn; an empty corridor. *Delores From 10 to 10* is based on the testimony of a Mexican worker in a maquiladora (a factory on the Mexican side of the U.S. border) who was detained and interrogated by factory bosses for twelve hours— without access to food, water, telephone, or a bathroom--on the suspicion that she was a union organizer. The woman attempted to press charges against her tormentors in Mexican courts but was unsuccessful due to a lack of physical evidence. In this work Fusco mimics the trope of video surveillance in order to image an act of political, human violence that previously had none, translating the undervalued testimony of an oppressed worker into something more than a speech act.

Coco Fusco, *Dolores from 10 to 10* (2002)
Video documentation for three security monitors
Dimensions variable, Courtesy the artist

The work's permutations in different media--live performance, distributed broadcast, and, in *Image War*, video installation-- reveal the unfixable nature of digital images in relation to that which they claim to represent. Fusco uses the digital not simply as a mode of distribution but to break up the work across various platforms, similar to the way in which divergent images are digitally disassembled and reassembled in various geographical and psychic spaces over digital networks like the Internet. This digitally emboldened nomadism parallels the original violence perpetrated by factory managers against a worker: a border factory is in many senses a "non-place," attached neither to the country in which it exists in a material sense (Mexico) nor to the country serviced by its exploited labor (the United States). Fusco represents and reanimates the spheres of the digital spectacle and global labor relations with the story of a worker that was lost--in many ways because its original representation was not spectacular enough.

Claire Fontaine's sculpture *Father & Son (Hooded Prisoner and Child)* (2005) also strives to re-articulate a more progressive ideology within the discursive space of the digital spectacular. In this work Fontaine took as her starting point a heavily reproduced news photograph of a hooded adult sitting on the ground clinging to a small child. Fontaine outlined the figures in glowing white neon, and they are unrecognizable and abstract for a split second before becoming identifiable as one of the many horrific images of a captured "enemy combatant" in the recent Iraq war. The use of neon here acknowledges the necessity to deal with spectacle culture on its own material terms. Yet at the same time Fontaine seems to challenge that need, applying black paint over the neon and making no attempt to conceal the various electronic apparatuses that power the sculpture. In its rapid movement to readability from a materiality that is equal parts glitter and abstraction, *Father & Son (Hooded Prisoner and Child)* operates at the same hyper-realized speed of digital spectacle. An overload of multi-media images in contemporary

image culture allows hegemonic regimes to inscribe ideological meta-narratives. Fontaine taps the same cognitive abilities of the subject targeted by Empire to meet different ends. In the work's move toward abjection--the horror of seeing the guardian, hooded and detained, dehumanized by the removal of his face, and clinging to the child--the work disrupts the flow of spectacular media, disarticulating its hegemonic ideologies from its representational strategies.



Claire Fontaine, *Father & Son (Hooded Prisoner and Child)*, (2005)
Neon, oil-based paint, fittings and transformer, Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and Reena Spaulings Gallery, NYC

It is important for radical art at this time, and especially so called media art to share in this project, attempting to articulate a more progressive ideology in the discursive space of image culture. Works must operate within the spectacle, acknowledging its contemporary importance in shaping subjects while also recognizing and acting upon its potential weak points, attacking indirectly in order to bridge the gaps and fissures between events and their representation—those spaces that Empire exploits so well.

**Notes:**
(1) Claire Fontaine's statement for exhibition at Reena Spaulings, fall 2005
(2) Retort – Boal, Iain; Clark, T.J.; Matthews, Joseph; Watts, Michael; *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*; p. 27 – 28, New York, Verso, 2005
(3) Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 12, New York; Zone Books, 1995
(4) ibid
(5) Hansen, Mark B.N., *New Philosophy for New Media*, p. 9; Cambridge, MIT Press, 2004
(6) David Harvey
(7) For a more thorough account of how such networks can enact control, see Alex Galloway's *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* (2004) Cambridge, MIT

Press.

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