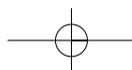
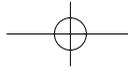


**please write your opinions on
US politics...**



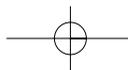


Rainer Ganahl

**please write your opinions on
US politics...**



onestar press



NEXT TARGET?

For the Armory Art Fair in March 2003 I was invited by *zingmagazine* to make a wall drawing for their magazine booth. Political tensions and frustrations were running high over an immanent attack on Iraq. In response to this situation, I opted for an interactive graffiti wall that invited visitors to write down what they thought of US politics. During five days the white wall panels of the booth were filled with texts, commentaries, provocations, thoughts, suggestions, personal accounts, wishful and hateful thinking, and graphics. My photographs of the results of this experiment are presented in this publication.

In this introduction I am not going to characterize, analyze or criticize any comments or symbols expressed visually on these walls. I look at them as material evidence of stresses we were all exposed to during this time. Most of the comments and graffiti written down mirror a large spectrum of contradicting views and positions on whether the USA should militarily attack Iraq. It was my belief that such an attack could be called pre-emptive, in violation of international law. Those weeks culminating in war were a particular historical moment: it was a time of world-wide opposition and of global anti-war mass protests. It was a time when US mainstream media still would discuss, question and challenge the logic of aggressive preemptive war doctrines. There was hope and outrage for and against breaking the automatic mechanism of massive military build-up. The reasons for war changed by the weeks, by the days: disarming Saddam Hussein, biological and chemical weapon threats, terrorism, democracy, human rights, the violation of UN resolutions, the reorganization of the Middle East and so on. In the end, these reasons could be considered an international passport for military incursions into nearly any country around the world.

I want to be clear that I do not share all the views or identify with all the statements written by participants. The first day of the five-day project, the project started with a black marker saying: PLEASE WRITE YOUR OPINION OF U.S. POLITICS ON THE WALL. With a red marker I then imitated two typical logos from network news: LIVE FROM NEW YORK and NEXT TARGET? The answer to this question was written in Arabic by an Iraqi friend, Ghazi Al Delaimi living in Germany: "Iraq, Iran, Syria." Now, a couple of weeks later, an uncounted and unreleased large number of Iraqi soldiers have been bulldozed into mass graves, hundreds of civilians, are dead or badly injured, and major museums, libraries and hospitals looted, partially burned and destroyed. In contrast to the mass-looting of Iraqi cultural and social treasures, most of the oil fields were secured by the US and the UK and are already producing. Iraq is mostly under control of the US army. It is "liberated," and the danger of weapons of mass destructions is alleviated, though none of them were used during the three-week war and none have been found so far. Syria is now accused not only of hiding Saddam Hussein and his top 50 men wanted but also of possessing weapons of mass destruction. RIGHT NOW: SYRIA DENIES IT HAS

CHEMICAL WEAPONS. The White House rhetoric against Syria and Iran is toughening and the message has been sent that they might be the NEXT TARGET.

The media as always has played a crucial roll in selling, branding and justifying this war. Soon it will do so by ignoring it altogether and moving on to local crime scenes, abducted children, corporate and political scandals or the next country on the list of evil-doers. But let me still recall how the media worked this time: A selected number of journalists were "embedded" in the military in Iraq, and, dressed-up in camouflage, repeated the press releases of the Pentagon. Journalists who were independent were sometimes beaten up, shot, targeted and killed by tank fire. The broadcasting stations of two major Arab network news that were able to report independently around the world were destroyed with missiles, an attack that was officially declared as self-defense. The US army said it felt threatened by gun fire from the roof of a building and reacted with overwhelming force. Various-long standing reporters just doing their job were dismissed from their positions in corporate media. Celebrities critical of the war were threatened and are still prosecuted with death threats, hate web sites, threats and hate mail to their sponsors, producers and media outlets and much more. The group Dixie Chicks were removed from broadcasting and Madonna withdrew her Bush-critical video release. Now, censorship and self-censorship is now after the war in full swing and reminiscent of McCarthyism.

I am fascinated and horrified by the logos, titles and subtitles used in TV news broadcasting. They cheerlead the news SADDAM STATUE GETS HAMMERED; they brand the news FOX NEWS CHANNEL. THE MOST POWERFUL NAME IN NEWS; they define the news OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM; they anticipate the news NEXT TARGET?; they abbreviate WAR ON TERROR and simplify the news REGIME GONE; they sell the news and compete for the news CNN. THE MOST TRUSTED NAME IN NEWS; they lend authenticity to the news LIVE FROM BADGHAD suggesting to be the epicenter of truth and truth production; news titles and subtitles may even contradict themselves: you can see on the same frame CELEBRATING-IN-BAGHDAD and a bit smaller underneath LOOTING RAMPANT IN BADHDAD. Dubious and insulting layering of information is omnipresent: sports scores may appear or scroll in direct proximity to death toll numbers, entertainment abstracts combined with the maximum of misery allowed on TV.

News network interfaces were even seen sticking on military equipment carrying embedded journalists. These abbreviated news accounts HEAVY BOMBING create images that remain, that indeed stick in the mind and can be caught with a glance when zipping across channels and other electronic devices. They are part of an effective infotainment that is as computerized, instant and effective as satellite guided bombs and night goggles. In the USA, this current war was narrated not only as a moral and civilizing obligation, a military necessity to secure peace and US security but also as a series of technological trade shows with the media as PR agents. 3-D animations interchanged with real footage, commented by military experts and analysts.

By no means do I want to suggest that these gestures of unedited writing down of one's opinion is a substitute for democracy or a movement that really could impact the count-down and run-down of things. Even large numbers of protesting people did not have the influence to stop this war. Yet any kind of questioning and expressing of dissent has a psychological impact on people that don't agree with the White House, the Pentagon and the majority of corporate media whose interest and ownership structure partially mirrors the population that occupies the White House. This war was not prevented. But the way this war was carried out in violation of UN laws is now subject to fights over definitions and history writing. It is not a coincidence that the first thing exported to Post-War-Iraq were media products. US-media networks are now donating parts of their programs and entertainment content to Iraq, even before humanitarian aid has yet fully arrived.

If we manage to inform others about what was and still is actually going on with our illegitimate, law- and constitution-breaching government and the majority of corporate media, we might be able to make future interventions of this sort less likely to happen. But not only do we have the fact against us, that "people really don't want to know" (Slavoj Zizek's thesis in recent interviews) but widely published intimidation threats to people having opposed the war. As I just mentioned, an endless subtle process of censorship and self-censorship is now unfolding in a climate where people are silent or silenced, evasive and kept ignorant about politics. Seeing signs of protest and dissent is therefore not just a drop on a hot stone but the necessary encouragement for people to continue the fight for a more just world that is not defined by corporations and aggressive governments for the interest of lobbies against the people, its environment and natural resources. Last but not least, we shouldn't forget the words of Martin Luther King who said that every bomb falling over Vietnam also explodes in an American inner city. To come here to an arbitrary stop I can only adapt King's sentence to the current situation and say this war not only looted Iraq and its treasures and natural resources but also the USA, its middle classes and poor people. Our actions overseas send ripple effects which reach home. Here, I would like to thank everybody who expressed his/her opinion on US politics participating in this project. I am grateful that so much interest and support for this project was shown. I am also specially indebted to two editors without whom this project wouldn't have been realized: Devon Dikeou, editor of *zingmagazine* who let me use her entire booth to unfold this project and Christophe Boutin, *onestar press* who saw it at the art fair and decided to publish it without delay.

Rainer Ganahl, New York, April 2003









