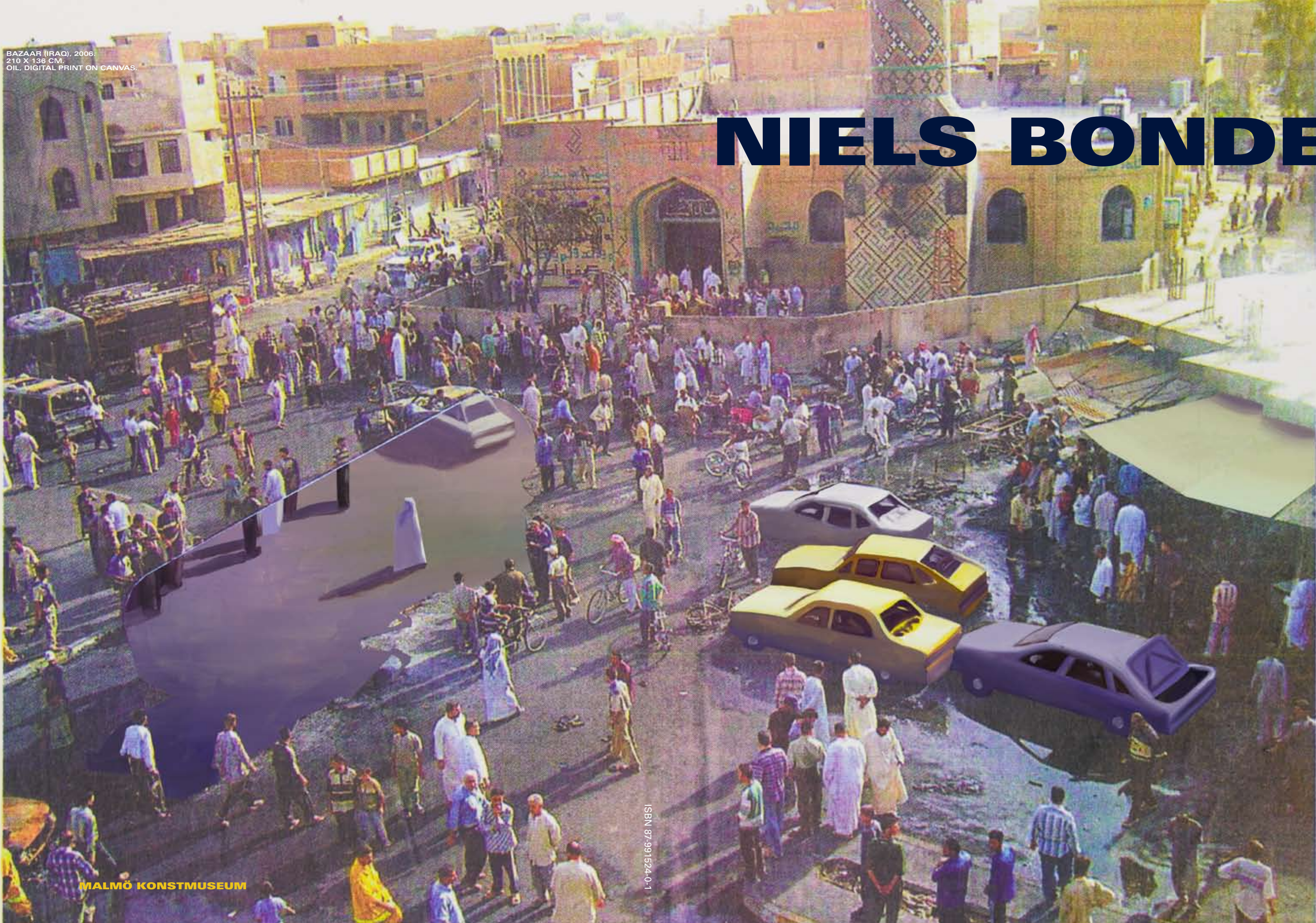


BAZAAR (IRAQ), 2006.
210 X 136 CM.
OIL, DIGITAL PRINT ON CANVAS.

NIELS BONDE



MALMÖ KONSTMUSEUM

ISBN 87-991524-0-1

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MALMÖ KONSTMUSEUM

NIELS BONDE

Souvenir

Malmö Art Museum's F Gallery is Scandinavia's oldest project gallery. It is centrally located, and most of our visitors pass through the exhibition space.

Over the years, many Swedish and foreign artists have exhibited in the gallery. Niels Bonde now returns to the F Gallery with a new project for the second time. His first exhibition in this space was in 1996.

Niels Bonde was born in 1961 and received his formal training at the Royal Danish Academy of Art and Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main. Recent years include a number of exhibitions abroad.

In an intrusive, almost brutal manner, Niels Bonde explores the relationship between the private and the public sphere. The present works in the F Gallery show the way we reject, eliminate, and abstract the information flow, before recasting it in a new form to conform to the way we seemingly want to manage it.

Existential questions have always been of decisive importance to Niels Bonde. This is also the case with his exhibition in the F Gallery.

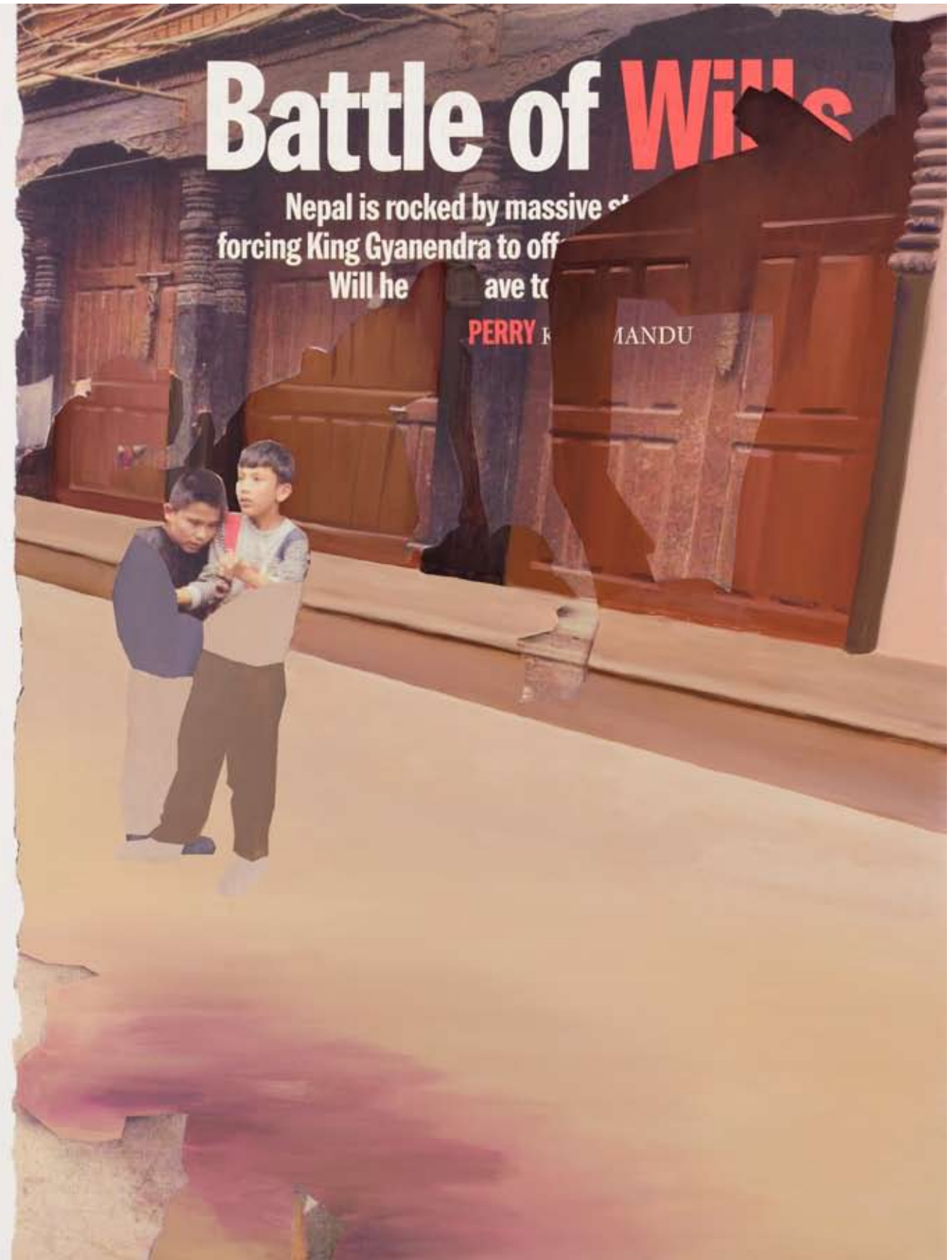
I would like to offer our heartfelt thanks to everyone involved in the realization of this project. And to Niels Bonde, I would like to say: Welcome back to Malmö Art Museum!

Göran Christenson
Director, Malmö Art Museum

BATTLE OF WILLS (NEPAL), 2006.
2 X 135 X 180 CM.
OIL, DIGITAL PRINT ON CANVAS.



CRACKDOWN:
Riot police baton
charge protesters
during their
march to the
palace last
Saturday
DAUTAM SINGH—AP



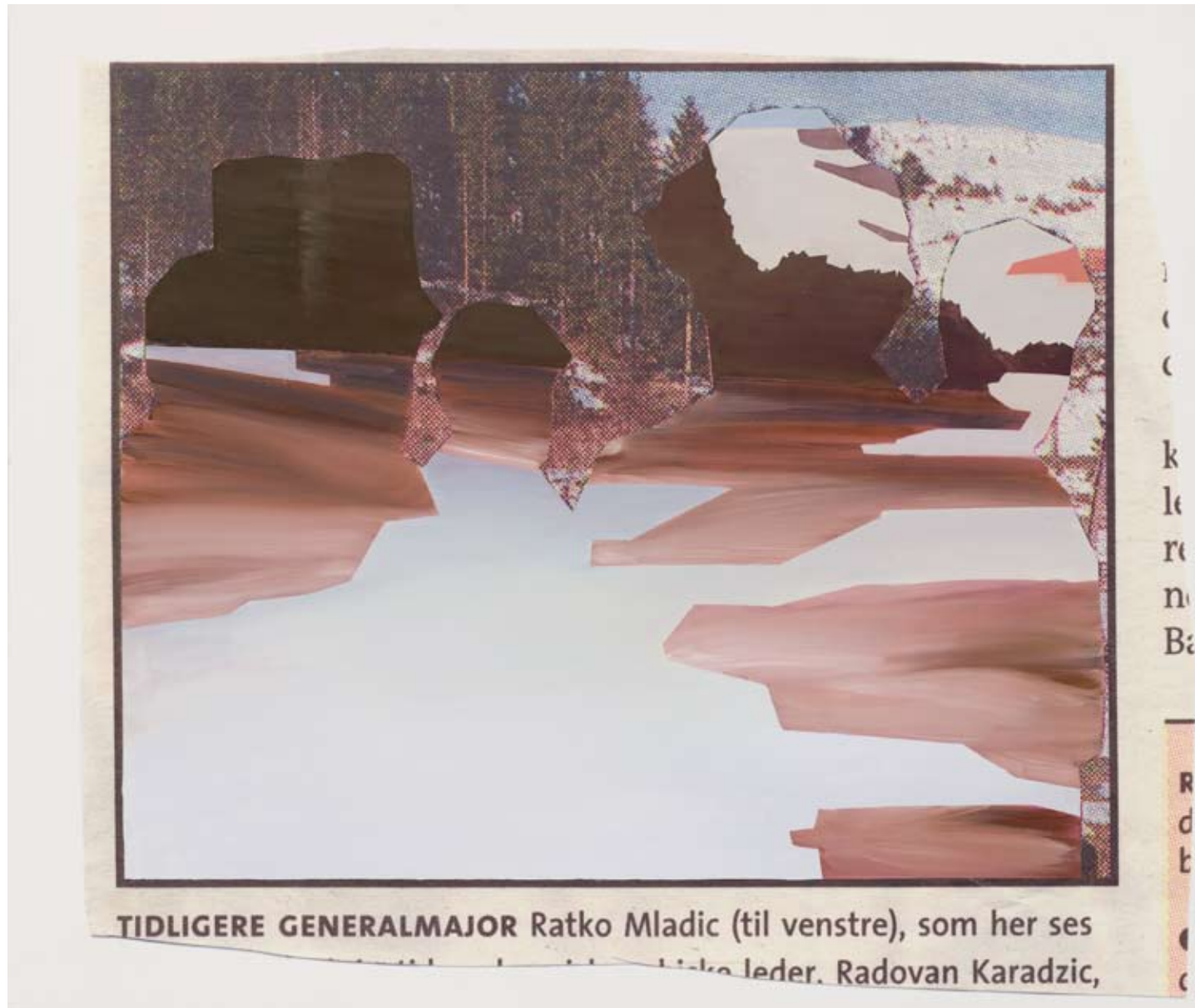


Krigene i Den tredje Verden har deres egen logik: alt taler for at fortsætte, intet for at standse dem. Derfor fortsætter de da også, uden afgørende slag, men med stadig mere brutale massakrer.

Krigsscenarier. På den ene side krigsherrer, der har gjort krigen til en forretning. På den anden side Private Military Companies, der arbejder for nationale regeringer – eller for FN.



SKI RESORT (SARAJEVO), 2006.
150 X 130 CM.
OIL, DIGITAL PRINT ON CANVAS.



ANDREAS SCHLAEGEL

Nothing Happened

“bete comme un peintre”

stupid as a painter

french proverb

“Perhaps there are certain ages which do not need truth as much as they need a deepening of the sense of reality, a widening of the imagination.” Susan Sontag writes in her 1963 review of Simone Weil’s book of essays.

Since the times of the Renaissance painting has been considered a tool to explore the truth, to render the present. A near scientific means to reveal the inner working of things, as reflected by their outside, an opportunity to take a step into the direction of the real, with all implications, ideological and religious. In this respect it is a stupid medium. The French painter Gustave Courbet knew, he considered his realism to bury the romanticism of his days. This is tangible in his paintings, particularly in the way he structures his paint evenly, as if paying little regard to the importance of details, the depth of vision or any symbolic value of the motif. Courbet’s unwillingness to resort to any form of idealism in his depictions of people and landscapes, preferring to focus instead on real scenes and their inherent dynamics, reflect his pursuit of truth as represented in the reality of the everyday, even in the faintest details or strange irregularities of nature. The importance and dignity the painter assigned to ordinary events, without romanticizing his subjects, was perceived by his contemporary

critics as a lack of refinement, and finally literacy: what was truth to the painter was repugnant and common – plain stupid to them.

“Since Courbet, it’s been believed that painting is addressed to the retina. That was everyone’s error... Before, painting had other functions: it could be religious, philosophical, moral...” Marcel Duchamp hated the French proverb, and it is rather ironic that he links the stupidity of painting to the very painter who coined the phrase realism. But Duchamp’s criticism is that painting since Courbet had merely copied itself in self-reflection, thereby oversimplifying and reducing itself to little more than a recording device, much like photography.

Photography owes a lot to painting, and vice versa. Photographers, who depict newsworthy events, often in a very spectacular manner, employ consciously or not art historical blueprints, often dealing with the heroism of the figure, the pathos of passionate expressions, violence, bodies caught in extreme displays of power. On the other hand many contemporary painters draw their inspiration from found photographic source material, like Gerhard Richter and Peter Doig. Gerhard Richter actually put his subject into focus by painting a photograph as



MUNCHOPHILIA, 2005. INSTALLATION. DIGITALPRINTS, PHOTOCOPIES, DVD. MUNICH REVISITED. HENIE ONSTAD ART CENTER. OSLO.

if it was out of focus – banking conceptually on the simplification of the image that occurs when details are lost in the blur. His work shows that images and the ideals they represent are static and superficial, therefore questionable, while reality is a process of imagination and revision. His blur-effect, achieved by simply wiping the contours soft with his brush, gives the image a photographic appearance while at the same time maintaining visible and simple painterly qualities that in their simplicity disrupt the motif, penetrating the subject, by depicting the fragility of the construction of its illusion.

In her essay Susan Sontag goes on: *“The truth is balance, but the opposite of truth, which is unbalance, may not be a lie.”* Hard facts make the daily news, as well as news require hard facts. It is a reciprocal relationship, with an inherent dialogue between the interests of those who shape our world, culturally and visually, with all consumers’ desires and preferences. News media define the prominence they are going to give to a story by a variety of factors: the expected impact on their audience, for example if dramatic events unfold unexpectedly, and if they fit well with the news organizations schedule. Consequently, developments occurring over long periods of time, will hardly receive a larger coverage.

The entertainment value of good news is far smaller than that of bad news that can shock and receive more attention by fuelling discussions. For this they need to be clear and unambiguous, requiring as little interpretation as possible. This effect is increased if the news can be told as a story, connected to a person, preferably of cultural proximity to the audience. Power, money, fame or notoriety on every

scale, from the individual to nations, will increase audience’s attention even more. Thereby the role of the image is of prime importance, as viewer’s attention spans grow ever shorter, the transport of messages relies increasingly on images. However that an item of news is considered a story, removes it from the realm of truth and pushes it towards negotiability and into the realm of the narrative, and the fictional...

Niels Bonde’s source material is as everyday as it gets. He paints the events out of the images in newspaper clippings. He enlarges clippings and has them printed on canvas, with fragments of the accompanying article, supposedly leaving little to the viewer’s imagination: the news deal with major catastrophes. But missing in his paintings are the actual protagonists: victims and perpetrators.

In his painting “Ski Resort,” a raw landscape of open and bare earth is covered by a fragmented white glacial surface, with some snowy hills in the background. The near abstract quality of the painted landscape bears reminiscence to the reductive imagery of backgrounds in video games, such as ego-shooters. There the animated graphics need to be extremely simplified and to be constructed from the most basic geometric forms, for quicker processor reaction and faster game speed.

Yet the two people missing from the image are identified only by the remains of the newspaper’s image subtitles, the former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic and his military commander Ratko Mladic, who are accused of genocide and ethnic cleansing, particularly the Srebrenica Massacre, Europe’s worst atrocity since WW2.

Cynically both are currently at large, and have factually been hiding for several years, refusing to appear before the UN tribunal in The Hague to face charges. That it has been possible for both to escape justice, despite international pressure on the Serb state, has made them popular national heroes within right-wingers, apparently a rather large and powerful community. The idea of a large group of people in Europe, who actively support suspected war criminals, thereby placing themselves outside of the law is rather unsettling.

Bonde’s paintings portray several unsolved situations, and the complex problems that come with them – as reflected in the locations that provide the backdrops of social unrest and war: Iraq, Sharm-El-Sheikh, Nepal, Congo, every single one is like an open wound. But his work can’t be reduced to mere

social commentary, it has other qualities. As paintings, they are hybrids of artistic craft and digital technology, the mere painting over of the unpleasant hard fact reveals the actual flatness of the news image. The really hard fact is that the consumer of news hardly knows anything about the soft facts – the location, the people involved, the historic roots of the conflict. The images of the places without the main protagonists appear interchangeable, turning the images into a cynical game of Karaoke, letting the viewer fill in what happened where. In earlier paintings Bonde applied this treatment to a variety of well known public figures in an act of artistic elimination, as if to ask: wouldn’t the world be a better place without these people?

Bodies are removed from the scene. The viewer in a kind of reflex tries to reinsert them into their context. What Bonde manages to make visible is something that lies beneath the images themselves, the way history is constructed in a process of collective canonization of the past, in an ongoing process of erasure. Producing a story of heroes and villains, history is reduced to a spectacle, much in the sense of Guy Debord’s paradigm that it is empty at its core, ready to be filled with a new unified idea of history.

Dealing with erasure and disappearance, Bonde’s work is also about forgetfulness and memory, raising the issue of how shadows of historic images shape the consciousness of the present. With the figures removed, the background of the news images turns into a landscape, the backdrop of before and after an event, with an occasional spectator in the image watching a non-event of ghostly outlines, paint textures with slightly different colours and the odd “lost” detail. Questions of historical visibility or invisibility are addressed, but they also point out the power of a culture based on images, and the desire to find the eminence of the “real” in the human body of the protagonist. The practices of image making in the news take this into account, and the artist invites his audience to reflect on the conditions that define both spectacle and spectator.

The artist Niels Bonde can look back onto a body of work that ranges from surveillance installations featuring fluffy toy animals with eerie camera eyes, to diagrams and flow charts of mental processes on an architectural scale, to computer designed carpets reflecting the way lives are lived in specific surroundings, as well as internet-based projects reflecting basic questions of interactivity. With his



I NEVER HAD HAIR ON MY BODY OR HEAD, 1995. INSTALLATION. PLUSH ANIMALS, CCTV, CAMERAS. VOGES + PARTNER. FRANKFURT/MAIN.

latest projects Bonde has returned to some of the most traditional tools in art. But this is by no way a departure from the basic interests that inform all of his work. A uniquely empathic perspective on subjects, and social frameworks in relation to systems of control, caught in between surveillance and paranoia – the portrayal of a society of neglect and self-denial, hiding in the spotlight of full media attention.

A culture of alienation based on collaborative interaction of the individual with representations of society perceives alienation as the flipside of the coin of freedom. This invention of romanticism suppresses the idea of alienation as a psychological strategy to avoid deep existential questions, freeing the individual to perform in everyday life, without weighing the consequences of every tiny decision

THE CONVERSATION. 1996.
INSTALLATION.
SURVEILLANCE
CAMERAS,
MONITOR,
CLOSET,
MALMÖ ART
MUSEUM.



against a worst-case scenario. Subjectivity requires alienation, it allows the individual to stay intact as a whole without cracking up, without dissolving into a mere blur of many tiny individual problems and decisions. Another layer is constituted by distractions, consummation or entertainment, alienating the individual from his actual alienation process. Here culture reveals a self-destructive element, since at this point the process of alienation is prone to manipulation.

Repetition is attractive – it produces comfort, because the outcome is always the same. For example, by reproducing familiar images that we count on recurring. Psychological conditioning by repetition is a basic element of education, encouraging memorization. The spectacle is not simply visual, it's psychological: it conditions the viewer, and thereby sets limitations to his capability of imagination of possibilities. The almost religious ritual of reading the papers, the internet or watching the evening

news on television is an important act of connecting to the nucleus of society, participating in a program of historical conditioning of the human consciousness. The media environment is inseparably connected to our consciousness by doing everything to stage our everyday lives. Media spectacles seep into the private realm when we think about identity or our political self in terms of certain media forms. Technology plays an important role in this, producing a symbiosis of innocence and moral authority, dividing the world into a safe inside and a hostile outside.

Niels Bonde's art offers the conceptual possibility of a different picture suggesting an alternative reading in a mass-culture context. International economic relations, in terms of resources and power structures have expanded the reach of capital and its image culture on a global scale. Sustainability is a key problem in the way things are going – however this only appears to increase a desire to maintain the illusion that things are going on as always. Immersed in media culture, as we are, there is hardly any communication happening that is unmediated. But what does the viewer comply to by communicating these channels of specific media? Commodity culture presents a variety of media forms and formats, primarily as an occasion to satisfy desires, be they individual wishes or political concerns. News images play a significant role in what could be seen as a kind of self-inflicted conspiracy to repress global developments. They can be regarded as representations of a common desire to feel that things are going well, or at least under control. Even when it is increasingly becoming clear they are not, for example in terms of ecological devastation, the big puddle of mud of repressed information, of a common shared bad consciousness. Supporting a culture of complicity and non-intervention the news actually inform and shape the future - by generating images of the present, in the form of images of the past. The audience has been educated to suspend disbelief and play along in a next level of hard core Karaoke. The erasure of the villains can make visible, that the problem is not in the foreground. This painter sure ain't stupid.

Andreas Schlaegel

Mr. Schlaegel is an artist and writer based in Berlin.

