

Yugoslavia Suite



A. War Games B. These Hands

by
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with
Richard Board

Perhaps it is a crazy idea that an American artist should go to the Balkans in the wake of 10 years of war culminating in the NATO bombing. What could an American, coming from so far away and knowing so little, have to say to those who lived through these experiences every day? Isn't this part of the problem, that Americans feel they can sit in judgment on far away peoples?

I do not think, however, that it falls to art to pass judgment, but rather to open new windows for reflection, to help us contemplate more deeply and see things from new angles. Judgments people make may be influenced by art, but only indirectly. Art that seeks to judge stops being art and becomes political speech.

Not to belittle speeches, which are important and necessary. I have made some myself. But hopefully tonight's concert will not be a political speech.

I do believe that we live in a global community, in which we are called upon to reflect on, and take positions on, events in far away lands.

I come to this from the position of an American citizen, whose government is unique in the world at having amassed the technological means to project military power anywhere in the world, at almost no risk to itself or its soldiers. The recent bombing of Yugoslavia was the first time that American spokespeople explicitly articulated a moral position vis-a-vis this capability: that there are causes for which Americans should be willing to kill, but not willing to die. A truly shocking development.

I also come to this as an artist who has used technology extensively in his art. And it is striking that the technology NATO used to bomb Yugoslavia is the same technology I use to make music. Which is also the same technology used to make the computer games which simulate real-life wars.

This is an historically new development. The technology used to make, for example, violins, soccer balls, and automatic rifles couldn't be more different. But today, the tools we use to play, kill, and compose music are the same..

I have even worked personally with an instrument designer who, when his musical work doesn't keep him busy, supplements his income by selling the same technology he develops for music to NASA (the US government agency that builds satellites and rockets).

War Games is a reflection on this new reality. The video mixes footage of computer games you can find in an arcade or play on a home computer, computer games the US military uses for training airplane pilots and tank personnel, actual footage of bombing missions in the Balkans, and other images from American television.

As a member of the audience it will be difficult to tell which is which. Not to worry: neither can anyone else. As I learned doing the research for this piece, the experience of playing a fighter-bomber computer game is now so similar to the experience of actually bombing a real city, the US military views recruits with extensive experience playing computer games as particularly promising.

Or take a gunner in a modern tank. Even in actual battle, when he pulls the trigger he is not looking at the actual target he is firing at, but at a screen showing an animated computer version of the target, the same image most of us associate with computer games. In fact, in many cases a child playing a game is looking at a more realistic image than a soldier firing a weapon of enormous destructive power.

These Hands by contrast, is a reflection on the "old-fashioned" kind of war which recently occurred in, for example, Bosnia. The kind in which killing happens at a distance of 3 meters instead of 30,000, and perhaps there is even eye contact between the executioner and the executed.

I have only experienced this through the mediation of American television. Thus this work is perhaps more accurately described as a reflection on the experience of watching these images flashed around the world by satellite to my TV. And this again is of course the same digital technology we just discussed.

I have no idea how these works will be perceived by people whose experience has been at the opposite end of this technology: who saw the real bombs really explode, and lost real friends and real homes, and now worry whether their water is really safe to drink, and their air really safe to breathe.

We sit on opposite sides of a technology chasm unfathomably wide. My hope is that these performances will be part of a dialog across that divide.

After each performance, audience members are invited to express their reaction to the performance in front of a video camera. After the tour I will edit these comments into a tape which will be shown when this concert is performed in other parts of the world. I will also make the video tape available to any artist in the Balkans who wants it. If anyone makes something with it, I will try to arrange to have that shown in conjunction with future performances as well. Hopefully, in this way the dialog will continue.

Two final considerations are in order. First, you will see that while there are images of victims in *These Hands*, there are none in *War Games*. But this is part of the point: victims are entirely absent from war as now experienced by members of the American military, a fact which of course dramatically heightens their experience of war as a game. In no way do I mean to imply that the victims in Bosnia were somehow more important than those in Serbia.

Finally, a more technical note. Much of my music involves improvisation, and *Yugoslavia Suite* is no different. The images I have in the computer are just "raw" samples of the various audio and video source material. All transformations and manipulations to them are performed by myself live on stage, by means of a laptop computer connected to a toy airplane throttle originally manufactured for use with fighter-bomber computer games. I have written the software necessary to use this stick to "play" the audio and visual elements in highly improvisational ways. *These Hands* is largely an improvisation. *War Games* is improvised in its entirety.

Many many thanks to the many friends in the Balkans who have done so much to make this happen.