



War Artist

Althea Thauberger on the cultural front lines
BY DEBORAH CAMPBELL

For students bounding up the stairwell of the University of British Columbia's humanities library, laden with textbooks and life plans, the massive photograph of eight Canadian soldiers re-enacting a military exercise in a fake Afghan village must have felt like an ambush. What were they doing, these young men in evergreen camo, posed with machine guns around a shot-up Toyota at the foot of a mountain that looked so oddly close to home? And why did they appear so self-satisfied? It was early 2008, the start of a new semester, and the question of war in a far-off nation was as abstract as a physics problem—that is, until a debate usually confined to panel discussions and T-shirt slogans erupted around the photograph by Althea Thauberger, whose reputation for provocation is matched by few artists working today.

“You have to imagine the scale of it,” says Scott Watson, director of UBC's Belkin gallery, who included *The Art of Seeing Without Being Seen*

(named for a military catchphrase for reconnaissance) as an off-site extension of the group exhibition “Exponential Future” in early 2008. “It puts you in the position of the Afghan villager. You walk around the corner and see these Canadian soldiers who want to detain you or point a gun at you.”

To ease the burden on library staff, whom he describes as both “gratified and alarmed” by the outcry, Watson adapted a comment sheet from one he'd nicked from the National Gallery 20 years earlier, when Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire* was purchased, to public outrage, for \$1.8 million. The responses, numbering in the hundreds, treat Thauberger's image as a Rorschach for their views on the war:

“These cute boys are waiting their turn to go off and kill Afghans for imperialism.”

“Don't mock the armed forces with this staged piece.”

“This is a university, not an armed forces recruiting center.”

And the most common sentiment: “Violence and libraries don't mix!”

While some objected to the fact that the soldiers appear to be horsing around (this was, after all, a re-enactment of a re-enactment, taken shortly after an explosives exercise involving a simulated suicide bombing) and others to the intrusion of war into the academic sanctuary, what most intrigued Watson was the argument that such an image should never have strayed outside an art gallery. It took the critic and novelist Michael Turner, in an article about the controversy, to frame the relevant question: “What better place than a university to allow such discussion?”

Thauberger, who could be taken for a grad student herself (she is, in fact, working part-time toward a Ph.D. in cultural theory), says she wasn't consciously thinking of Jeff Wall's *Dead Troops Talk* when she made *The Art of Seeing*, though she typically devotes an entire class to Wall's famous light box when teaching at Emily Carr University of Art and Design. The similarities are striking. Both are staged images set in a fake Afghanistan involving troops who appear in an incongruously fine mood, though Wall's soldiers are representations of dead Soviets in the 1980s rather than real Canadian troops preparing for war on the same battlefield where the

Soviet Union founded and fell. The scale and the high production values are also common to both works.

The most glaring difference is that Thauberger works within political and social dimensions that are anything but staged. That meant allowing her subjects to represent themselves as they chose. It also meant working with the Canadian military to get permission to photograph them in the first place—permission that remained in question until the last moment, when an ally on the inside intervened on her behalf. “It was like a tightrope,” she says at her live-work studio, a converted police station in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. “Trying to find the line as you’re walking it.”

It is precisely the real-world context and the unpredictable variables involved in working with her subjects—who are essentially co-creators rather than hired props—that make Thauberger’s work both forceful and fraught. Such was the case with *Songstress*, a controversial early work. The art film, which began with a 2001 ad in *Victoria’s Monday Magazine* seeking female singer/songwriters, generated a frenzy of critical response that typically lauded the work while mocking her young performers, who appear both awkward and endearing as they perform original songs in the natural setting of their choice. Was she exploiting their naïveté? Or realizing their dreams of fame and exposure without considering how they might be viewed? (The question of whether the stars they seek to emulate are exploited by record companies for the benefit of the bottom line was never broached.) The patronizing critical descriptions of the young women took Thauberger, who was an aspiring singer herself at her subjects’ age, by surprise. “Of course the piece flirts with that, the supposedly superior position of the viewer,” she says. “But I think that power relationship breaks down when viewers feel implicated by their identification with the subjects.” That perspective—the superiority of the viewer—gained particular importance because *American Idol*, where the audience serves as both judge and executioner, emerged at the same time. “I was paralyzed for a while after that,” she adds.

The question of Thauberger’s relationship with her subjects is implicit in her work, says Reid Shier, director and curator of Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver, who has curated her work in the past. She inevitably gravitates to “populations of invisibility,” he says, exposing “blind spots” in popular culture. “We can easily avoid looking at what our soldiers are doing in Afghanistan, and we are more familiar with watching 17-year-old girls perform when they are fantastically talented. Althea finds ways to investigate those erasures and put them in a visual form.”

At the same time, her refusal to furnish visual clues as to how to interpret her work asks viewers to think for themselves, something Shier says most people find uncomfortable: “Where her work is successful is precisely in avoiding instructional clues, putting you in a position where you have to construct your own opinion.”

Her collaborative process shares much with British artists like Phil Collins, who has filmed interviews with people who felt damaged after appearing on reality-TV shows (raising the question of whether he is exploiting them once again), and Jeremy Deller, whose *The Battle of Orgreave* re-enacted a violent miners’ strike almost 20 years after the fact, placing miners in the roles of both strikers and police. But perhaps the most relevant comparison is to the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, who generates discomfort, even anger, through his work with marginalized populations—hiring, for instance, a homeless person to clean the shoes of gallerygoers without their consent during an opening, or encasing a group of Iraqis in polyurethane foam.

Like Sierra, Thauberger has taken her work in increasingly political directions. Take *Murphy Canyon Choir*, a choral performance she made for inSite, a foundation that supports international artists in the creation of projects surrounding the U.S.-Mexico border region. Flown to San Diego and taken on tours to visit migrants and impoverished workers in the factories of Tijuana, she instead became fascinated by San Diego’s military culture, which is at once ubiquitous and invisible. Poverty is widespread among American military families: some actually live in Mexico and commute to their U.S. bases; families with two or more children live in corporate-run compounds off-limits to outsiders. By volunteering with military-support organizations, she received a crash course in the difficulties such families face in their day-to-day lives. Despite the political climate—it was 2005 and the Abu Ghraib pictures had recently been published—she was interested not in making a statement about American involvement overseas but rather in exploring the possibility of creativity within that community. Over the course of several months she gained access to both the military and the corporation that ran the Murphy Canyon housing complex.

Getting the buy-in of the art foundation was another matter. Antiwar sentiment was at its peak. “So to propose

to work in a military community without taking a critical position on the war was unthinkable to them," she says. "There was a lot of consternation." After finally obtaining the support of the foundation, Thauberger spent months working with a number of military wives (no military husbands volunteered), hiring an experimental composer and a choral director for a one-time performance of songs the women had written themselves. Some were maudlin and predictable ("Wife of a Hero"); others very nearly avant-garde.

Thauberger has come to understand that her interest in isolated communities may be rooted in her own experience growing up in a Jehovah's Witness family (she broke with the faith at age 17). "I understand what it is like to be inside a rigid belief structure," she says, seated at a desk piled high with philosophy books, camera equipment scattered throughout her vast studio, which has ceilings high enough for a basketball game. "In fact the art world can be quite isolated, ideological and rigid, though we pretend not to be. I have strong views about Canadian foreign policy and the occupation of Afghanistan, but so do many in the military. When I spend time with them I have ways to relate. I don't see their experience as being much different from my own." The habit of defying dogmas—even her own—underlies her provocative stance.

In the spring of 2009, Thauberger travelled to Afghanistan as an official Canadian war artist through a program that began during the First World War and informed the work of an earlier generation of artists, including Alex Colville and the Group of Seven's F. H. Varley and A. Y. Jackson. She wanted to witness Canada's first active combat operation since the Korean War; the outpouring of response to *The Art of Seeing* made it all the more imperative. She was flown to Afghanistan by cargo plane, then to a forward operating base in a Griffon helicopter, and then returned to Kandahar Airfield, a complex that hosts some 30,000 people.

She'd applied for the position after meeting the British artist Steve McQueen, who had visited Iraq as a war artist for the United Kingdom in 2003. McQueen, best known for his feature film *Hunger*, which won the 2008 *Caméra d'Or* prize at Cannes, returned from Iraq to create a series of postage stamps bearing the faces of British soldiers killed in action. (While military families have been strongly supportive, it remains to be seen whether the stamps will ever be officially issued.)

Thauberger had proposed to create work around Canadian women serving in Afghanistan, and it was in Kandahar that she found her setting. The photographs, which at the time of my visit with her were not yet in final form, show a group of some 30 women outside Kandahar International Airport, a modernist structure built by the United States in the 1960s, damaged during the Soviet occupation and the U.S. invasion and now maintained by NATO. The airport symbolizes a moment when the country seemed to share a future with the rest of the world: an Afghanistan, in effect, that no longer exists.

Uniformed, bearing the arms they must carry at all times, the women in Thauberger's images are running exuberantly across the tarmac toward the camera. They are doing something they rarely have a chance to do in Afghanistan: enjoying themselves. Indeed, while they represent a nation at war, they hardly seem to be thinking about the war at all. But we will.

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