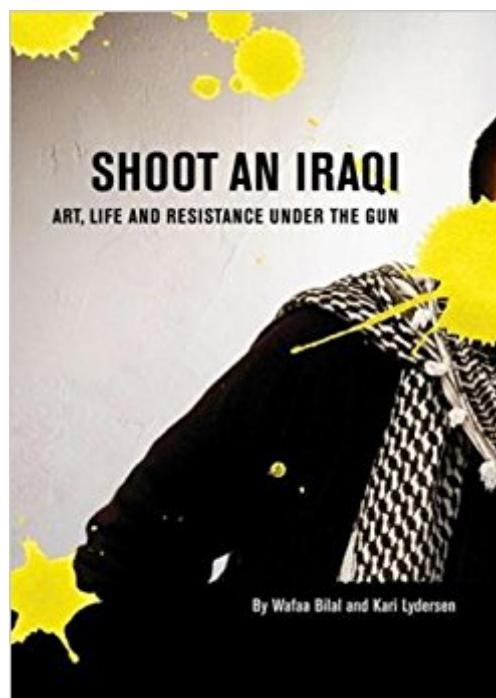


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# Shoot An Iraqi: Art, Life And Resistance Under The Gun



## Synopsis

Wafaa Bilal's childhood in Iraq was defined by the horrific rule of Saddam Hussein, two wars, a bloody uprising, and time spent interned in chaotic refugee camps in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Bilal eventually made it to the United States to become a professor and a successful artist, but when his brother was killed by an unmanned U.S. Predator drone, he decided to use his art to confront those in the comfort zone with the realities of life in a conflict zone. His response was "Domestic Tension," an unsettling interactive performance piece: for one month, Bilal lived alone in a prison cell-sized room in the line of fire of a remote-controlled paintball gun and a camera that connected him to Internet viewers around the world. Visitors to the gallery and a virtual audience that grew by the thousands could shoot at him twenty-four hours a day. The project received overwhelming worldwide attention and spawned provocative online debates; ultimately, Bilal was named Chicago Tribune's Artist of the Year. Structured in two parallel narratives, the story of Bilal's life journey and his "Domestic Tension" experience, *Shoot an Iraqi* is for anyone who seeks insight into the current conflict in Iraq and for those fascinated by interactive art technologies and the ever-expanding world of online gaming. "Once I picked up this book, I could not put it down. There is something so urgent and compelling about Bilal's story, as though he is speaking to our time. His story is not just for those interested in the arts; it is a human story of the horror, frustration, and tragedies of war." •Mary Flanagan, artist and author of *re:skin* "This is an unsettling and gripping book. It poignantly recounts a dark and imaginative experiment inspired by an excruciating and ghastly reality. Its unsettling effects couldn't be more welcome: we desperately need to be shocked out of our collective zombification, and this book does that by leading us through a wild labyrinth at once aesthetic, political, and existential. Potent stuff." •Danny Postel, author of *Reading "Legitimation Crisis" in Tehran* "Who in their right mind would allow the internet to shoot at them? *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life, and the Resistance Under the Gun* tells the story of Wafaa Bilal. When his brother was killed by an unmanned Military device during the Iraq war, Bilal took it locked himself in a room, a camera showing him to the world with a remote controlled paintball gun connected to the internet, in the name of art and political statement. Bilal explains himself quite well, making *Shoot an Iraqi* fascinating reading." •Midwest Book Review "Weaving together accounts of Iraq and America, art and violence, performance and reality, past and present, this gripping account all but shakes the reader by the lapels." •Publishers Weekly "Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal has exhibited his art worldwide, and traveled and lectured extensively to inform audiences of the situation of the Iraqi people, and the importance of peaceful conflict resolution. Bilal's 2007 dynamic installation "Domestic Tension" gained global recognition,

being named Artist of the Year by the Chicago Tribune. Bilal has held exhibitions in Baghdad, the Netherlands, Thailand and Croatia; as well as at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, the Milwaukee Art Museum and various other US galleries. His residencies have included Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga, California; Catwalk in New York; and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Starred Review. Weaving together accounts of Iraq and America, art and violence, performance and reality, past and present, this gripping account all but shakes the reader by the lapels. Iraqi-born artist Bilal records the month he spent confined in his 2007 interactive performance piece entitled Domestic Tension, living under constant fire from a chat room—controlled paintball gun 24 hours a day, his every move dogged and determined by the hostility—or benevolence—of his thousands of online viewers. The nerve-rattling conditions were intended to reflect both decades of suffering endured by millions of Iraqis and Bilal's own life and the costs of surviving Saddam's regime, Gulf War bombardment, Sunni-Shia violence, a brutal Saudi refugee camp and, finally, the difficulties and joys of the American immigrant experience. The author emerges as an Iraqi everyman, and his provocative book brilliantly juxtaposes images and time frames to convey the toll of war on Americans and Iraqis: We may think we are surviving, Bilal writes, but as I... twist and turn through sleepless nights, flailing between worlds of comfort and conflict, hope and despair, I wonder. (Dec.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

\*Starred Review\* Iraqi artist Bilal immigrated to the U.S. after Desert Storm, and channeled his haunting experiences into his performance pieces, culminating in *Domestic Tension*. For 31 days and nights, Bilal was the target of a paintball gun controlled by online participants who were invited to "shoot an Iraqi." Video cameras recorded Bilal's struggle to retain his composure if not his sanity as he interacted with shooters and viewers via a chat room and YouTube. Now he writes about his art and his life in Iraq, revealing overlooked daily struggles of existence under a dictator, in war, and during a long-term occupation. Ultimately the death of his brother back home via an unmanned American drone compelled Bilal to make his greatest artistic statement yet against all that makes the war in Iraq unreal to most outsiders. Recounting his own traumatic journey and the long-ranging effects of his bold installation makes for a powerful and demanding read that is, frankly, a literary punch to the gut. Bilal discloses all the risks he has taken with his art and asks why Americans are not willing to take their own chances and uncover the dirty truths about the Iraq War. --Colleen Mondor

In November, 2010 I read about the artistic exploits of Wafaa Bilal and was intrigued. So intrigued I blogged about his latest project and posted it in several online forums. I also ordered his book, "Shoot an Iraqi; Art, Life, and Resistance Under the Gun" co-written with Kari Lydersen. I read it in one sitting. Astonishing in content and brilliantly written, Bilal and Lydersen have taken, by my first estimate, an ill-conceived, albeit somewhat artistic, publicity stunt and turned it into a MUST READ commentary on the cost of war...now my second and more accurate estimate. In a nutshell Wafaa writes about his confinement to an exhibit room at the Flat File Gallery in Chicago. He called the exhibit "Domestic Tension" and lived within its confines for one month. That's the domestic part. The tension comes from the added twist. If you visited him, either on-line or in person, he gave you the option to fire a yellow paint ball at him at 300 feet per second, all day, every day. Approximately 65,000 balls of yellow paint were fired during his ordeal. He was forced to live under the fear of being whacked at anytime. There was a field of fire available to the paint ball gun which he could escape by remaining close to the ground...inducing the stress of literally living "Under the Gun". When online visitors stopped in they could chat with him directly, setting up a tension between those who could reach out to the humanity of the situation observing and bearing witness to the ongoing persecution, and those who wanted to have sadistic fun at the expense of another human being. (NOTE: Although sadistic fun unfortunately occurs in warfare I do not believe it is a primary driver

yet it does become another ugly cost of war). As he writes about his ordeal during his month in captivity he wraps in the story of his early life growing up in Iraq under the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. He describes what life was like for the Iraqi people, their hopes and dreams for education and prosperity, their day to day family existence, with both their good humor and sanity evaporating during what has now amounted to almost three decades of constant war. Wafaa escaped as a refugee to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and finally to the United States but carries the scars of many haunting years of fear and persecution in its countless forms. That is what he was trying to recreate in "Shoot and Iraqi" as a cathartic response to the guilt he has felt by leaving Iraq and thus surviving to tell his tale. "Shoot an Iraqi" is not a war protest, though many who read it might consider it so...I might also add that some associated with his project seem to convey a clear anti-war vibe...yet Wafaa resisted the invite to preach rather he simply wants us to think about the cost of war in human terms rather than ethical or moral implications. This book is also not an indictment on the use of remotely piloted vehicles to execute war, which have gained so much favor and criticism during the wars in the Middle East...yet remain highly misunderstood. Again, Wafaa resists the temptation to draw too many parallels between what he was doing and this new brand of warfare. Early on he exhibits a desire to make the parallel, primarily when he attributes a tragic event which cost the life of many innocent civilians to reconnaissance conducted by an unmanned aircraft. Only in the sense that violence is being executed at a distance can the two be compared. No other parallels to this brand of warfare exist. But this is not a debate to have in this book review. The other parallels to the stress of those caught in the war zone and living minute by minute "Under the Gun" with the constant threat of death are quite real. Wafaa has a unique vision in his art form that will continue to elicit strong criticism, censorship, and even persecution, whether intentionally by his own hand or by the hand of ignorance. He grows and we grow as a result of what he has experienced and has shared. This book goes a long way in reducing the hand of the ignorance...in this particular case mine.

Typically I try not to get into politics of wars but as fate had it, I actually had the privilege of having Wafaa himself as a professor when I attended The School of the Art Institute of Chicago a few years back when he was still teaching there. I didn't know what to expect having an Iraqi for a professor, mostly because I had little knowledge of Iraq outside of media coverage. As I began to get to know him, not only did I start to learn about his life and his part played within the political climate, I also learned how his artwork turned into a pivotal role in his own survival. His past artwork has shown how he is able to bring up controversial issues in a way that illuminates both sides yet remains

unbiased. He is truly inspirational and I was constantly in awe of him when he was my professor. I decided to buy his book sometime later out of curiosity and it stood up well to the actual man it is about. The book does a fantastic job of jumping back and forth from his life growing up in Iraq to one of his more current pieces "Domestic Tension." The book also does a tremendous job explaining his artwork, why it was necessary for him to work "Domestic Tension" (a piece that literally had people shooting paintballs at him over the internet) and also what the cost of war is on a human level. Whether you're an artist, interested in the impact of war or just interested in biographies, I highly, highly recommend this book.

I loved this book. It's well written and provides more information than just about Wafaa's art project, but his life story. I like the parallel story structure and the incite that the book provided. I'm interested in art and Iraq, so this book was perfect.

Met the author. Nice guy. Likes the book. Don't agree with some of his business practices especially those with veterans.

This is a excellent book about one of the more important pieces of performance art in the last ten years.

This is a moving and poignant piece that deserves a wide audience. I feel fortunate to have read it.

"An anti-war book. Iraqi-American Wafaa Bilal sets out to bring people from the "comfort zone" to the "conflict zone" by setting up an art project that allows people on the internet to shoot at him with a paint gun...true story. Reminded me of how prior to the war on terror I used to protest at the University of Washington against the Iraqi embargo that was bringing misery, heartbreak and death to the Iraqi people. Surprised that I forgot about that and disappointed that the propaganda war machine tricked me into thinking that non-action was a patriotic option. One of my favorite quotes from the book: "Some say they are trying to stop the shooting, a lot say they are having a party shooting him, most are just watching. That, my friend, is America." I dropped my copy at the Philz Coffee in Palo Alto, CA. "

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