

Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan  
Wood, Anton Vidokle

# Editorial – “Pieces of the Planet” Issue Two

e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle  
Editorial – “Pieces of the Planet” Issue Two

01/02

In 2003, Slavoj Žižek made a very prescient observation to explain how the US under George Bush used a plot twist borrowed from Alfred Hitchcock to justify the invasion of Iraq.<sup>1</sup> He called it the “Iraqi MacGuffin.” Now, what is a MacGuffin? Exactly. The example Žižek gives: Two men run into each other on a train. One carries a suitcase. When asked what the suitcase contains, the carrier replies, “It is a MacGuffin.” But what is a MacGuffin? “It is a device used for killing leopards in the Scottish Highlands.” But there are no leopards in the Scottish Highlands. “Well, then that’s not a MacGuffin, is it?” Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction were never found, and somehow the fact that they did not actually exist was secondary to their enormous value as a narrative device for producing a precondition for going to war in Iraq.

Žižek’s piece goes on to list a chain of geopolitical ironies circulating at the time between statements and intentions, from the outsourcing of torture to protect the veneer of democracy to the US support of patently religious states such as Israel or anti-democratic monarchies such as Saudi Arabia. It is almost quaint to read now, at a time when these inconsistencies have become status quo. But how did this happen? We all remember Donald Rumsfeld’s RAND-corporation style stumble into metaphysics when he announced the existence of known unknowns and unknown unknowns – the things we know we don’t know and the things we don’t know we don’t know.<sup>2</sup> And looking back at Žižek’s illuminating metaphor, it starts to become clear that something happened a decade ago, perhaps in parallel with the internet becoming a major actor in the transmission of geopolitical events across vast distances at incredible speeds. Narration emerged as the primary means of explaining events or justifying political acts. On the one hand, we can, and we must, fault the Bush government for using an absurd fiction to justify war. But the absurdity of the act released something else that was always hidden behind the need for political will to control the narrative. It recognized and released an enormous space within the political field where legitimacy is produced by means of narration rather than evidence or a court order. While artists were struggling to locate political agency in works of art, the actual political sphere had already gone fully cinematic in its approach.

Hitchcock is often called the Master of Suspense. And suspense is a funny thing. It has a lot in common with Kant’s sublime, as a sense of mastery over an impending disaster that one has the luxury of witnessing but not the power to stop. It is a narrative device that outsources responsibility to an author’s shadow game of concealing and revealing at intervals, allowing

for a confusion that never compromises continuity. It is a machine that produces chains of cause and effect, and with those, it writes history. It is a mechanism for producing the foundations for speaking, much like any decent work of art. How then to counteract the abuse of this incredible power that narration has gained in recent years? Many of us are familiar with how Gulf States such as the United Arab Emirates are now directing a vast fortune towards subsidizing a cultural sector advertising humanistic values alongside a record of monarchic and nondemocratic rule. And it is happening through artworks and the participation of artists who specialize in the production of legitimacy and narrative. In a sense, we are all playing the same game of unknown unknowns on a board with many dimensions. The production of legitimacy and causality from nothing. What is that in your suitcase? It is the world. No it's not. I would really love to know.

x

e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 Julietta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle  
**Editorial – “Pieces of the Planet” Issue Two**

02/02

1  
See <http://www.lacan.com/iraq1.htm>.

2  
See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiPe10iKQuk>.