

S H O O T I N G

An introduction to guns in contemporary art

Contemporary artists have generated a wide-ranging body of work in which small arms feature prominently. Using a variety of media and approaches—whether paint, video, photography, sculpture, or mixed-media techniques—these artists consider the role of guns in areas as diverse as the media, video games, arms production, the arms trade, and politics. This brief overview presents a selection of their work.



Andy Warhol, *Gun*, 1981-82
Synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen ink on canvas

RDB/Corbis/Andy Warhol Foundation

GALLERY

Guns and the media

In *Gun* (1981–82), **Andy Warhol** represented a firearm using the same celebrated format that established figures such as Marilyn Monroe, Elvis, and Elizabeth Taylor as icons. Ever ahead of his generation, Warhol branded the gun a symbol of popular culture, drawing attention to the plastic quality of the weapon. Today throughout the world, film stars, rappers, and other role models continue to actively promote that image as a symbol of power and sex appeal.

To what extent has the ubiquitous nature of gun imagery contributed to the trivialization of small arms? A video installation by the Belgian artist **Francis Alÿs** offers an answer to that question. In *Re-enactments* (2002), the artist is filmed walking through the streets of Mexico City with a loaded Beretta in his hand. Nearly five minutes elapse before the police see and arrest him. Strikingly, none of the pedestrians notice the firearm, their attention captivated by the filming camera. Alÿs then asks the police officers for permission to re-enact the armed stroll and the arrest. The second video is thus identical to the first, except that it is staged. By showing these two documents side-by-side, Alÿs is asking viewers to recognize the power of the spectacle in contemporary society: even police officers are willing to allow an armed man to walk the streets for the sake of film-making. The work implicitly calls into question the authenticity of 'reality TV', and notably of crime and police shows.

Today, public television networks and channels such as CNN and Sky News compete to show the most explicit images of breaking news stories. In the manner of reality TV, they actively broadcast real gun violence, including kidnap videos showing hostages surrounded by gunmen as well as actual executions. Yet in a culture where fictional gun violence is commonplace, has the spectator become numb to reality?



Francis Alÿs, *Re-enactments*, 2000
Still of video installation

Courtesy of Galerie Peter Klehmann, Zürich

Swiss artist **Christoph Draeger** considers this problem in his 2002 installation *Black September*. The title of this work refers to the Palestinian terrorist group that abducted and killed 11 members of the Israeli team at the Munich Olympics in September 1972. The installation re-creates the room



Courtesy of mullerdechiera

Christoph Draeger, *Black September*, 2002
Single channel video on DVD, 13 min

where the hostages were held, replete with the television on which the armed hostage-takers were able to follow the highly publicized manoeuvres of the Munich police. In an adjacent space, Draeger projects a film that re-enacts the missing events as they may have taken place in the room. The film—made with surveillance and amateur video cameras—thus presents the missing ‘footage’. The viewer is consequently faced with a dual reality: real video documents are complemented by fictional film. Similarly, the room is faithfully recreated, yet it is no more than a reconstruction. In Draeger’s work, fact and fiction converge to create a new reality.



Wang Du, *Parade*, 2000.
Courtesy of the artist

Not unlike television and film, newspapers, magazines, and Internet sites contribute liberally to the proliferation of gun imagery. Chinese artist **Wang Du** selected images of the Chinese army from magazines and newspapers for his 2000 sculpture installation *Parade*. He reproduced each image in the form of a monumental sculpture, transforming the one-dimensional original into a three-dimensional object while retaining the photographic perspective. By assembling these new forms to create a giant, euphoric ‘parade’, Du highlights the artifice of images designed to promote militant patriotism. The military parade, traditionally a sober and disciplined display

of armed forces, here assumes the air of a Hollywood-style performance, glorifying guns, youth, and nationalism.

Gun play

A number of contemporary artists have responded to the presence of guns in video games, particularly the increasingly realistic, ultra-violent 'shoot'em-ups'. The heroes of some of these games have risen to the rank of cultural icons: both Lara Croft and Resident Evil have been turned into blockbuster Hollywood films and the animated heroine of the game *Bloodrayne* was featured in the October 2004 issue of *Playboy* magazine. In the moral and physical safety of their own homes, the users of these entertainment systems can play at shooting and killing with guaranteed impunity.

The Dutch–Swiss artist **Yan Duyvendak** analyses the social implications of these games in his 2004 performance *You're Dead*. Dressed as a soldier and armed with an automatic rifle, the artist carries out and simultaneously narrates a sequence of manoeuvres that correspond to a video game projected onto a screen behind him. What initially seems like the simple impersonation of a video game character takes on complexity when the artist enacts the same sequence as a player and finally as a soldier in battle. Three levels of engagement become apparent: the character programmed to carry out orders, the player who delights in the excitement of bloody combat, and the soldier who fears for his life. The repeated narration conveys different meanings in each sequence. By passing imperceptibly from one role to the next, the artist compels the viewer to question society's acceptance of gun violence in the video game format and to reflect on the significance of the familiar phrase, 'You're dead'.



Courtesy of the artist.

Yan Duyvendak, *You're Dead*, 2004

Along similar lines, the Swedish artists **Tobias Bernstrup** and **Palle Torsson** consider a player's willingness to adapt to the ethics of video game culture. For their project *Museum Meltdown* (1996–99), they customized the game *Half-Life* to simulate the interior of three contemporary art institutions.¹ The games invite the visitor to engage in a frenzied shoot-out in which survival depends on killing monsters and government troops. Players are free to destroy artwork as they move from one room to the next. *Museum Meltdown* thus brings the violence of contemporary culture into the heart of the art institution, traditionally a haven for the conservation of art. The visitor-turned-player is forced to face the destructive instincts present in us all.



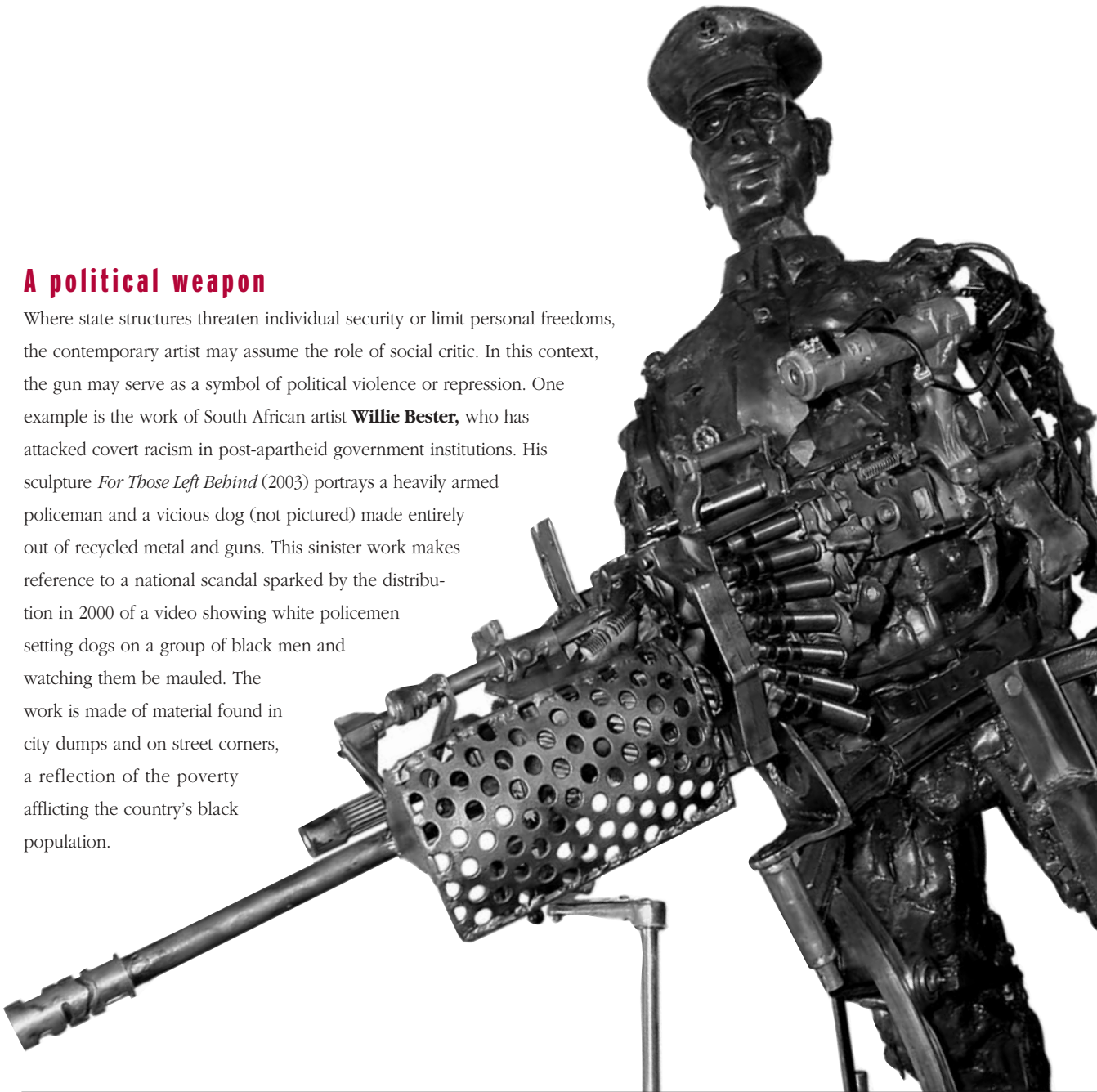
Tobias Bernstrup and Palle Torsson, *Museum Meltdown*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1999 (modification of the computer game *Half-Life*)

© 2002 Tobias Bernstrup. Courtesy of Andrejnschiplienko

¹ Arken Museum for Modern Art, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1996; Contemporary Art Center, Vilnius, Lithuania, 1997; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden, 1999.

A political weapon

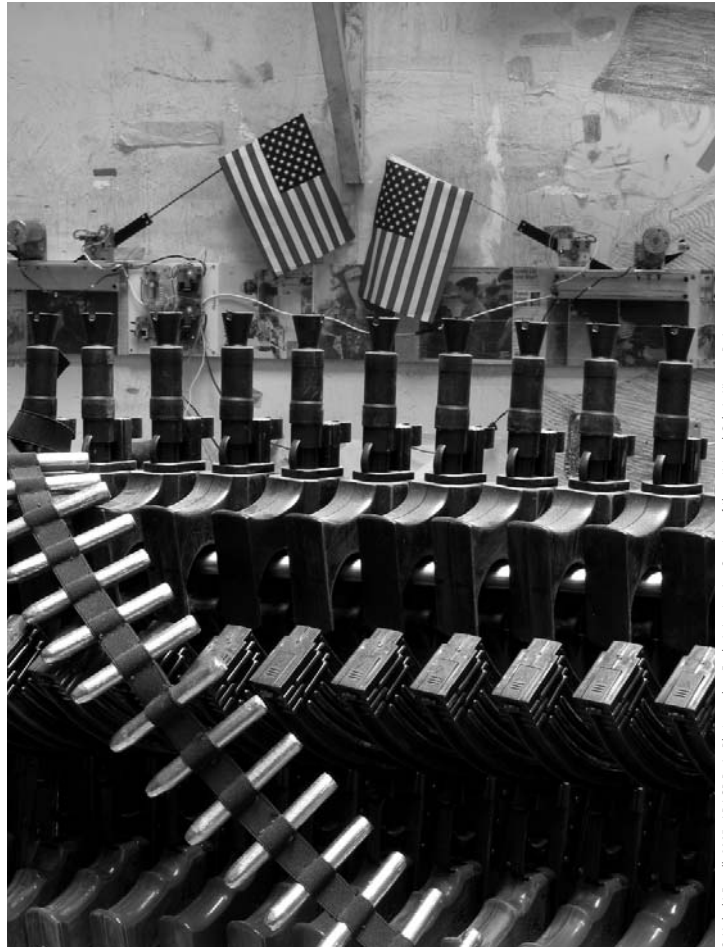
Where state structures threaten individual security or limit personal freedoms, the contemporary artist may assume the role of social critic. In this context, the gun may serve as a symbol of political violence or repression. One example is the work of South African artist **Willie Bester**, who has attacked covert racism in post-apartheid government institutions. His sculpture *For Those Left Behind* (2003) portrays a heavily armed policeman and a vicious dog (not pictured) made entirely out of recycled metal and guns. This sinister work makes reference to a national scandal sparked by the distribution in 2000 of a video showing white policemen setting dogs on a group of black men and watching them be mauled. The work is made of material found in city dumps and on street corners, a reflection of the poverty afflicting the country's black population.



Willie Bester, *For Those Left Behind*, 2003 (detail)
Courtesy of the artist and 34 Long

Iranian artist Shirin Neshat uses the gun as a symbol of rebellion and repression in her photographic work, which forms a complex portrait of women in contemporary Iran. 'Speechless' (1996) shows a young Muslim woman, her face painted with text from the Koran in the style of traditional henna body decoration. Her headscarf lifts from her cheek to reveal the tip of a gun barrel aimed at the viewer. On one level the image speaks of the importance of martyrdom in Islamic society—religious acts from which women are traditionally excluded, but to which some aspire. Yet it also suggests the oppression Muslim women are subjected to under strict religious law. This woman is literally masked by the veil and the religious texts on her face. The gun at her head is not controlled by her. The viewer must ask: who is controlling the gun?

Political powers engaged in the arms trade are at the core of Irish artist **Malachi Farrell**'s 2003 installation, *Nothing Domestic*. In a colourful marketplace of gun-laden stalls, countries proffer small arms for sale. An intricate mechanical system unites the vendors via the guns on display, which have been programmed to move in unison to music broadcast on loudspeakers. The arms trade thus becomes an international ballet in which all parties move to the same beat. The absurdity of the dancing guns comments on the global weapons trade, in which states with conflicting political agendas continue to make arms deals.



Malachi Farrell, *Nothing Domestic*, 2003 (detail)
Installation and sound, variable dimensions

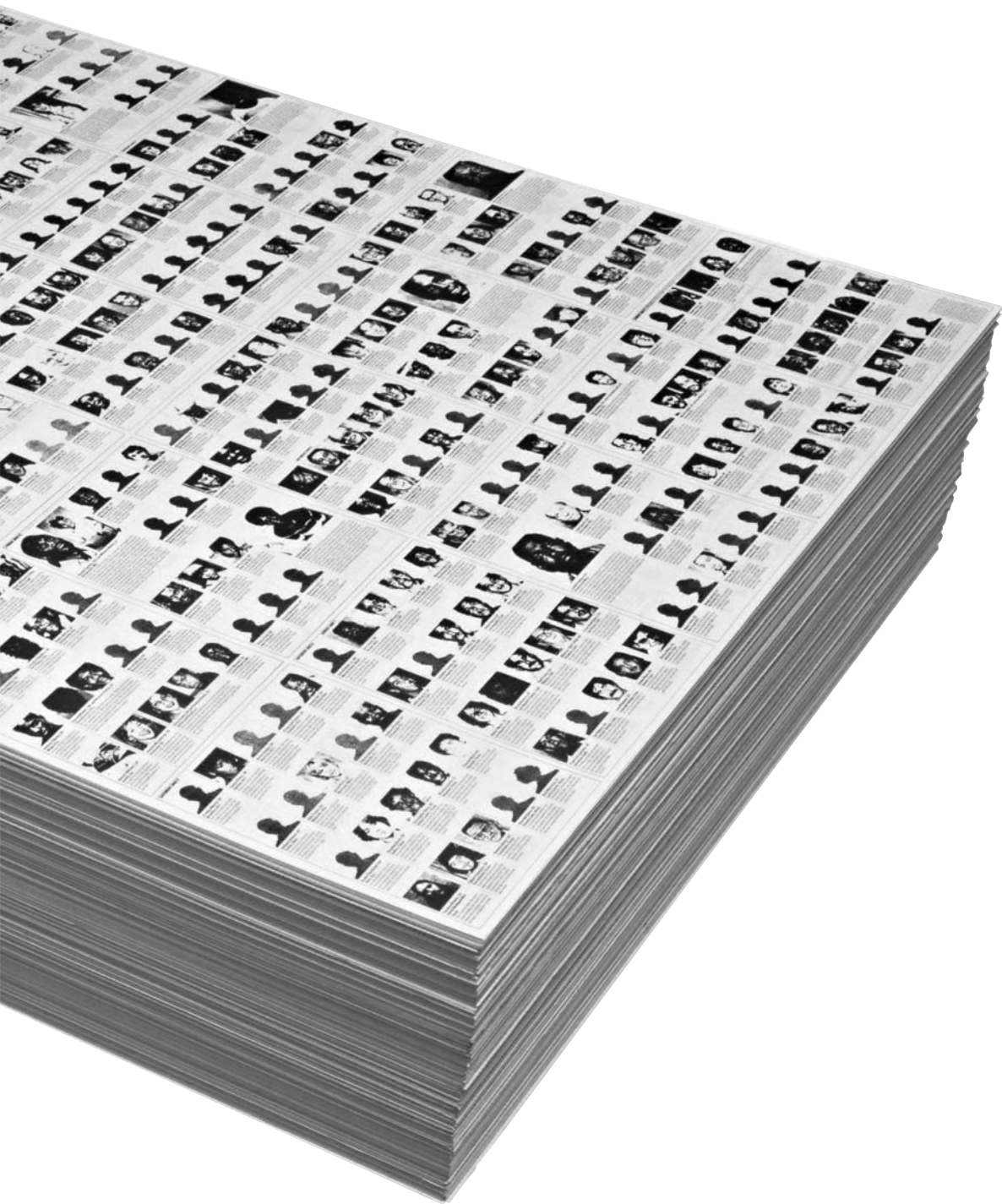
Shirin Neshat, 'Speechless', 1996
RC print (photo by Larry Barns)
119 cm x 86 cm
© Shirin Neshat, 1996
Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York

Victims and survivors

Complementing the literal representations of guns in contemporary art presented above are works concerned with the effects and ramifications of gun violence. In response to the high levels of gun fatalities in the United States, a number of US artists



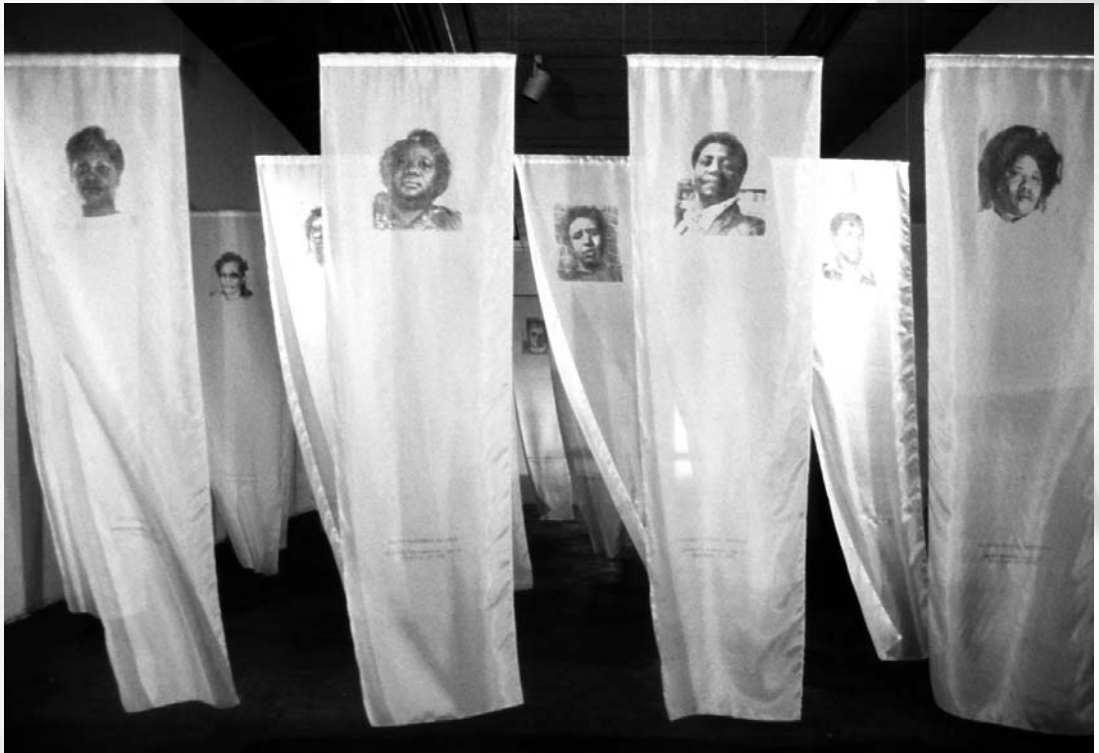
have focused on the loss of life and grief of loved ones. In 1990, Cuban-born artist **Félix González-Torres** began work on *Untitled (Death by Gun)*, a nine-inch stack of paper on which he printed photographs of 460 individuals killed by gunshots during the week of 1–7 May 1989. Captions on each photograph provide details about the victims and the circumstances of their deaths. The artist designed the stack so that visitors may take the sheets to keep or pass on to friends; depleted sheets are then reprinted and replaced. This memorial may thus circulate indefinitely.



Félix González-Torres, *Untitled (Death by Gun)*, 1990, nine-inch stack of photolithographs, offset printed in black, sheet: 113 cm x 82.5 cm

© 2005, digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.
Purchased in part with funds from Arthur Fleischer, Jr. and Linda Barth Goldstein. Inv. n. 103.1991

In *Shroud: Mothers' Voices* (1992), another US artist, **Bradley McCallum**, concentrates on the mothers of gunshot victims. In this installation, white, shroud-like sheets hang from the ceiling of the exhibition space; each sheet features silk rubbings from photographs of the mothers of local gun victims. Accompanying videotaped interviews feature the same women talking about the children they lost and the people they blame for their deaths. Through this piece, McCallum gives a voice to the families of the victims of gun violence.



Bradley McCallum, *Shroud: Mothers' Voices*, 1992
Silk with photo images, text, and video interviews

Courtesy of the artist

In the work of the German-born Jewish artist **Ruth Liberman**, the target of the gunshot is not a human life, but the written word. The artist aims to obliterate the power of words in documents that underpin political oppression and violence. She focuses on written forms that can have a direct impact on human life: decrees, orders, lists, warnings, and condemnations. For her 2001 triptych *Shot*, Liberman asked a marksman to shoot the German word for 'burden', *Bürde*. By shooting certain German words that she singles out as anti-Semitic or associated with the Holocaust, Liberman is simultaneously destroying the power of these words to communicate and calling attention to the role language plays in violence.

Ruth Liberman, *Shot*, 1992
Iris print on paper, 76 cm x 51 cm

Courtesy of the artist

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Büird



Courtesy of Atelier Van Lieshout

Atelier Van Lieshout, *Pistolet poignée américaine*, 1995
Steel and stainless steel; L: 12 cm, W: 11 cm, H: 2 cm
Courtesy of Atelier Van Lieshout

Legal boundaries

In contrast to artists who focus on gun violence, the following artists develop themes related to arms production. The Dutch **Atelier Van Lieshout** produced some of the most intriguing, and no doubt controversial, examples of this type of work. Between 1995 and 1998, this multidisciplinary artist collective fabricated a series of firearms as artwork, including machine guns and the *Pistolet poignée américaine*. This manufacture formed part of a larger project through which the group aimed to create an autonomous free state. Although the arms were never conceived for use and are not operational, the project highlights the facility with which gun- and bomb-making instructions may be accessed on line and in libraries.

The limits between art and gun possession are also tested in the work of Danish artist **Jens Haaning**. In his piece *Sawn-off* (1993)—a sawn-off shotgun with real ammunition in a plastic bag—the artist explores the border between what is acceptable in the context of an art exhibition and what is acceptable in daily life. Similarly, for *Weapon Production* (1995), Haaning recruited immigrants to manufacture street weapons over a two-week period in a Copenhagen workshop; the space was then opened to the public.



Photograph: Jens Haaning. Collection of Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Aarhus, Denmark
Courtesy of the artist

Jens Haaning, *Sawn-off*, 1993
Sawn-off shotgun with ammunition in plastic bag

Taking the flirtation with legal boundaries to the limit is French artist **Philippe Meste**. In his work *Military Surveillance Post* (1994), the artist placed a 'military base' consisting of sand bags and guarded by armed men in the middle of a flea market in Marseille. Meste's use of guns serves not as an anti-military gesture, but rather as a vehicle for the criticism of Western insecurity. The artist utilizes the very tools of security forces to produce anxiety, calling into question the security concerns of highly protected societies. In an even more radical work, Meste attacked the flagship of the French navy, the aircraft carrier *Foch*, with flare rockets launched from a boat in the harbour of Toulon (*L'attaque du Port de Toulon*, or *Attack on Toulon Harbour*, 1993). His attack posed no threat to the sophisticated warship.



Philippe Meste, *Military surveillance post* (Poste militaire), 30 October 1994
Black and white print, 80 cm x 120 cm
Courtesy of Jousse Entreprise, Paris

An object of beauty

What defines the relationship of gunowners to their weapons? In his series *Friendly Fire*, German photographer **Peter Tillessen** steps into gun collectors' homes to capture them with their weapons. Yet the images do not reveal the owners' faces; their anonymity may well reflect a lack of social acceptance of gun collection today. The weapons themselves display a streamlined design and functional simplicity not unlike those of the apartment furnishings. The viewer must get a sense of the owner's relationship to the gun from the body language rather than a facial expression. The gun conveys an extraordinary sense of power and violence within these ordinary settings.



Courtesy of the artist

Peter Tillessen, *Friendly Fire*, 2003
C-print, 40 cm x 50 cm

British artist **Cornelia Parker** considers the gun as a purely formal concept in her 1995 sculpture *Embryo Firearms*. She presents the gun at its earliest stage of production, at the point where its form becomes recognizable. As yet, the object is no more than a piece of metal, yet it already functions as a powerful symbol. By revealing the gun in its nascent form, the artist underlines the fact that deadly weapons are merely pieces of metal. It is man who forges the metal, perfects the mechanisms, and uses the resulting weapon.

In our sights

The diversity of ideas and issues explored by this small selection of international contemporary artists demonstrates that small arms continue to be a major concern throughout the world. As long as the gun continues to function as a symbol and weapon—a dual role it is not likely to shed in the near future—artists are sure to reflect on its impact, conveying messages that may help gauge a variety of social responses to the use, abuse, and proliferation of small arms worldwide.



Cornelia Parker, *Embryo Firearms*, 1995
Colts 45 at the first production stage
48.6 cm x 33.3 cm x 6.1 cm

With thanks to Colts Manufacturing Company LLC, Hartford, Connecticut
Courtesy of Galerie Guy Bartschi, Geneva

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