

Spectacle in a State of Exception

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Watchtower, 2008, digital print on Dibond, Allen Ball

Through photography, this project maps out the visible and invisible traces that remain on the surface of the militarized landscape of the Multinational Forces and Observers (MFO) base at El Gorah in Northern Sinai.

In December 2005, I accepted a volunteer post in the Canadian Forces Artist Program (CFAP) to undertake a tour of duty under the auspices of Operation CALUMET, that took place between June 2-11, 2007. My mission was to witness and document the daily lives of Canadians serving in the armed forces in fulfillment of CFAP's mandate.

The photographic images I took during my post with Operation CALUMET depict meetings between the physical landscape of El Gorah; the large-scale architectural presence of the MFO; and military personnel situated within their role-specific daily tasks and the immense physical infrastructure of the base. These images reflect and record the way in which contemporary military strategy has moved away from traditional forms of military engagement, and illustrate the increasing significance of new communication technologies and social labour in military operations. Consistent with the observations of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri on contemporary warfare, which they describe as the general, global, and permanent state of

exception from the rule of law, my fieldwork documented military functions that were decor-porealized, bodyless or virtual interventions. Such interventions rely upon the MFO base, itself, as a site of pure representation. Regionally, the MFO operates more as a witness than as an actor in its theatre of war, thus, the problem of representation is central to both the form and content of *Spectacle in a State of Exception*.

Further, acknowledging that my engagement in the field at Operation CALUMET was facilitated by the Canadian Forces, questions regarding my own subjectivity are foregrounded in this project and unavoidable. Similar to embedded journalists situated in Iraq in 2003, my exposure to events was mediated by the geographic and social itineraries of the armed forces. Therefore, a self-reflexive and critical awareness of the contradictions intrinsic to the environment is crucial. The conditions of my exposure to my subject was an important part of what I documented. In other words, my project constitutes a visual ethnography of an embedded artist. At the heart of my proposal lies the question of how does an artist represent the experience of contemporary warfare?

The underlying assumption of *Spectacle in a State of Exception* is that one's experience of a space is shaped not only by personal biography but also by what Susan Sontag refers to as collective cultural instruction, providing the basis for the potential for one site to have multiple social existences. At the heart of my project lies the question of how does an artist represent the experience of contemporary warfare?

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