



WAR IS NOT OUR WAY OF LIFE – THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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Rainer Ganahl

In



Rainer Ganahl "Basic Arabic, What is your nationality?" 2004, Courtesy of Wallach Art Gallery and Baumgartner Gallery.

Conversation with Paul Mattick

Rainer Ganahl, born in Austria, studied art in Vienna, Paris, and Düsseldorf; since 1990 he has been living predominantly in the United States. His recent exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna, Road to War, was devoted to the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; Spring Publications has just issued Counting the Last Days of the Sigmund Freud Banknote, containing reproductions of a series of text drawings made in 2001-02. An exhibition, "Please, teach me ..." Rainer Ganahl and the Politics of Learning," will be on view at the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University from 28 September to 10 December. This show, which is a sort of mini-retrospective, provided the occasion for this interview.

Brooklyn Rail (Paul Mattick): I 'm struck by the title of your Columbia exhibition: "Please, teach me ..." Of course, it's appropriate for a university gallery. But it runs counter to the dominant position taken by artists, especially modern artists: typically, they have taken the position of teacher. What do you have in mind with your appeal for instruction? And to whom are you addressing yourself?

Ganahl: "Please, teach me ..." is not only the title of several bodies of work but is also at the core of many art projects I have been involved with for more than a decade, which have involved learning foreign languages, going to lectures, reading books, listening to people, and engaging in dialogues (most recently, for instance, with Iraqis). Though I am in constant need of language instructors, I don't have any specific population in mind in using this title, since everybody could teach something.

Rail: As you say, the original incarnation of this idea was in your language-learning pieces. What gave you the idea of taking learning languages as an art activity? Which languages have you tried to learn, and why?

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Ganani: moving to America in 1990 was a very important change in my life. I had just finished my studies at various European universities and art schools, none of which ever mentioned the problem of Europe's (or the West's) colonial legacy and its intellectual and cultural ramifications. My encounter with the writings of Edward Said (*Orientalism*), Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall and many others was a big eye opener and led to a revival of the interest in learning foreign languages I had since childhood. Already at age 12 I was learning Italian on my own, followed by other languages. Of course, I grew up not far from Italy and France, and Spain was soon too on my map. But Edward Said's books about the interconnections of culture and politics and the problematics of intercultural exchange made me newly sensitive to the concept of foreign language acquisition. After studying Russian for some years in the aftermath of 1989, I started to learn my first Asian language, Japanese, as an art project in 1992. At that time Japan was seen as a threat to Western economic hegemony—they were on a buying spree in America—similarly to the way that China is perceived today. A couple of years into the Japanese learning enterprise, I took on Korean for 3 years, precisely because it became evident to me that Japanese-Korean relations were not very sound at the time. It was quite interesting to experience myself, when I studied Japanese, learning not only a national language but also acquiring national prejudices and sympathies. In 1999, I launched myself into "My First 500 Hours Basic Chinese"—another language project that is ongoing. When it became obvious that George W. Bush would act upon his preventive war doctrine I embarked on a second language (in addition to Korean, that is) that is spoken in a country listed as a member of his Axis of Evil: Arabic. Since 1992, I have been studying Arabic along with Chinese. I just started my "Second 500 Hours Basic Arabic" and I more or less know what I have to do in this line for the next couple of years.

Rail: Central to the Columbia exhibition—again, fittingly—are photographs of famous cultural theorists lecturing. They could be taken as academic celebrity photographs, though I doubt this was your intention. What are you after in these pictures, that makes taking this risk worth while?

Ganahl: About 10 years ago, Edward Said gave me permission to audit an entire seminar of his at Columbia University, entitled "The Representation of Intellectuals." That seminar, and its title, gave me the idea to take a camera to the many lectures I went to visit anyhow. In 1993, I started to parody colonial practices by bringing books to the different foreign locations—Japan, Russia, France, etc.—where I was invited for exhibitions. I would engage with interested people in reading and discussing them, and I photographed our sessions. The interesting results—pictures of people reading and discussing—was one more motivation to expand this kind of "pedagogical photography" and start the photo series "S/L," for "Seminar/Lectures," that you are referring to. Of course, I only photograph people I'm interested in, or people who discuss topics I'm engaged with, since I have to listen to them for about 90 minutes at a time, but that doesn't mean that all of my S/L subjects can be referred to as theory stars. Also, the photographs of the lecturers are presented together with photos of the public, the audience. Unlike my own reading projects, the S/L series involves professors and lecturers, and also university set-ups, pedagogical institutions, and educational politics. The questions these pictures are meant to raise can't be limited to the lecturing subjects and their topics—what is the lecture about?—but also must include questions

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Curated and hosted by the Rail's
Fiction Editor Donald
Breckenridge

The Independent Press
Association-NY recently
honored The Brooklyn Rail with
the following awards:

1st place: Best article about
Immigrant Issues or Racial
Justice--Gabriel Thompson,
"One Immigrant's Journey"
(September 2004).

1st place: Best article about the
Arts*--Amy Zimmer, "The
Brownsville Rec. Center" (April
04)

2nd place: Best article about the
Arts--Brian Carreira, "Harlem
Arts: A Faux Renaissance" (Dec
03/Jan 04).

2nd place: Best editorial or
commentary--T. Hamm, "The
Issue is Free Speech" (Dec
03/Jan 04).

3rd Place: Best Investigative
News Story--Marjory Garrison,
"Minimum Matter of Survival"
(May 04)

Honorable mention: Best
Investigative News Story--
Williams Cole, "Housing vs. the
RNC" (June 04).

Honorable mention: Best
Original Feature--Yvette Walton,
"My Life in the NYPD" (Dec
03/Jan 04). Come to the
Brooklyn Waterfront Festival.

about who sits in these classes (racial and socio-economic profiling), the prerequisites for admission, the general ideological outlines of these platforms, and so on. I think that the results of several hundred sessions of these events are not only a (self-)portrait of my intellectual flâneurism, but also present a sample of a decade's intellectual activity in various places. In reactionary times, with eroding public liberties and diminishing public and private spheres, it is no wonder that universities, cultural and scientific communities are coming more and more under attack. It might be useful to remember an earlier moment.

Rail: In the last few years, your work has focused fairly closely on the American attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq. How is this focus related, if it is, to your earlier interest in issues of communication? When you address a postcard to George W. Bush asking, "Please teach me Arabic," what do you have in mind?

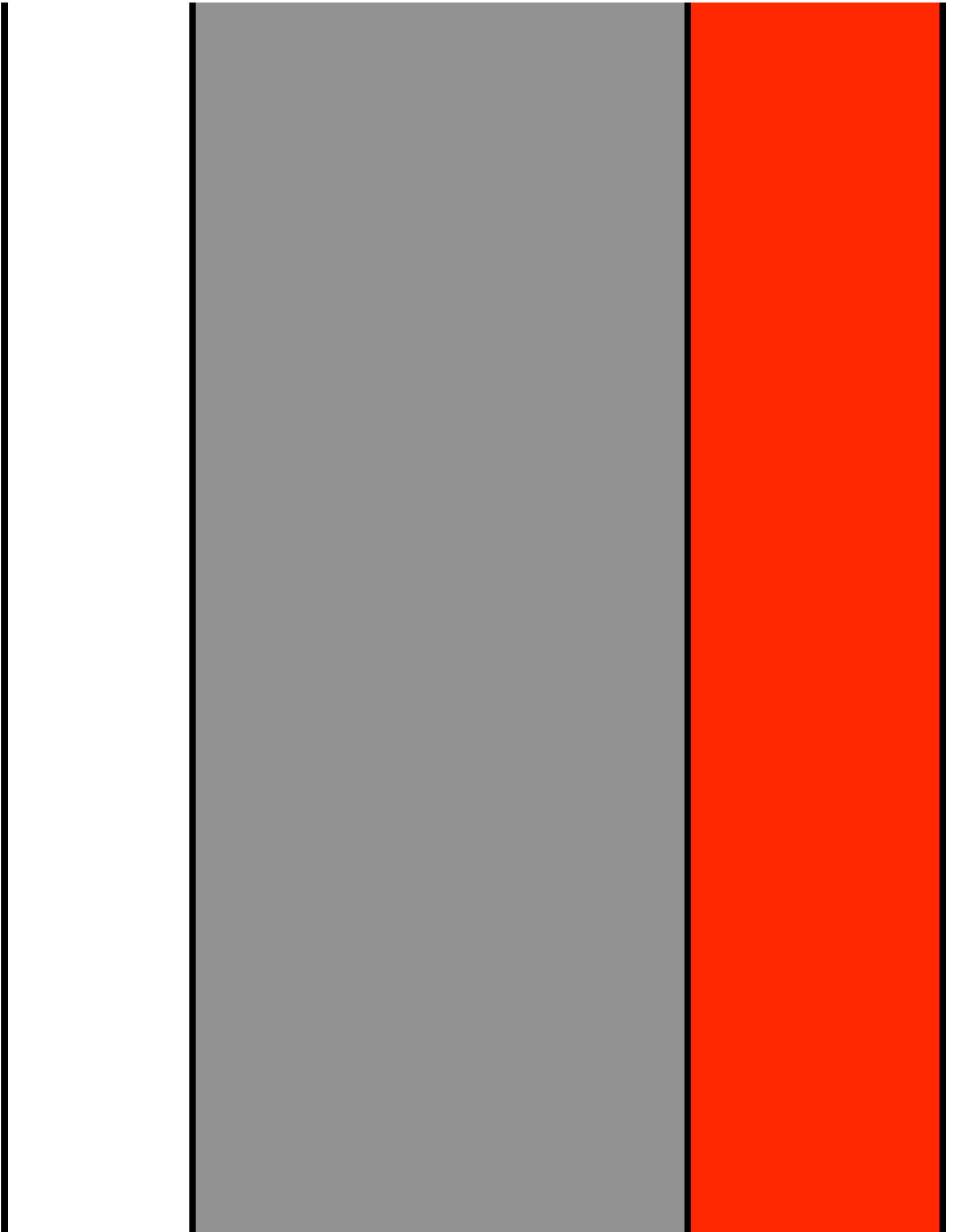
Ganahl: It is true, the Bush administrations and the right wing media industry has made me feel miserable and disillusioned in many ways. Their aggressive politics contaminates language and creates a propagandistic nomenclature that is worth observing. I reacted in many ways to phrases such as their "War on Terror," their "Axis of Evil," their "Shock and Awe," their "Operation Iraqi Freedom" with their "Freedom Fries" and their "Patriot Act." Last year, while attending Arabic classes in Syria, I sent postcards to friends that I stamped with the phrase "Please, teach me Arabic." For over ten years, whenever I have traveled to a country where a different language is spoken, I have been sending postcards to friends using stamps that read "Please, teach me (whatever language it is)."

With Arabic perceived in the media as a suspicious, dangerous code, it became clear that I should start sending "Please, teach me Arabic" postcards to people in order to suggest they could know more about this linguistic/cultural region so closely associated with their fates. For the first time, I addressed my postcards to denizens of the White House, news experts covering the Middle East, and others not my personal friends. In this show, I display 160 postcards which I had sent addressed to such "famous Americans" in care of the Wallach Gallery. It is up to the visitors to the exhibition to find or not find existing or non-existing connections to the Arab world. The commercial postcards that I used show either a statue of Saladin (the Arab leader who stopped the crusades in the Middle Ages) or Damascus's "Martyr Square." The stamps show the former Syrian president Assad, who ordered the slaughter of ten thousand Syrians in the city of Hama in the 1980s. This was carried out in plain view of the world's population, which wasn't too upset by it, probably since many victims belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Though the wars and tragic events produced by the current administration's politics have kept me busy in the last couple of years, I have continued all my other projects as well, since most of my art works are ongoing. Somehow, almost everything belongs to my "educational complex." In many ways, I have also been able to address war and neo-imperial practices from within the framework of my work oriented towards issues of education and dialogue: thus I have been learning Arabic, have organized readings on Frantz Fanon, and have visited/audited/photographed multiple panel discussions addressing our cynical and sinister times.

rain: These works are political art in anyone's definition, I think. What is the relation, as you see it, between politics and the conditions of displaying art in a university gallery—or a commercial gallery, for that matter? How do the politics of war and the politics of an artworld career fit together?

Ganahl: To a certain degree any work that is relevant to the times one lives in has a political character. The politics at work at a university museum are complex as well, though I'm not at all involved in this sphere. Bill Kaizen, the curator of this show and a Ph.D. student under Benjamin Buchloh, has selected me for this show to address issues of dialogue and communication in contemporary art. Concerning the art world, a successful career is defined by sales and prominent representation in commercial galleries and trend-setting museums, and I think it is thus less a question of what one does but more of how it looks, how objects are rendered. Given the nature of my projects, I can't help but choose forms of representation that are economical and minimal, so I am not very well situated in this rat race. Whatever I do, whether it is considered political or paedagogical, if it doesn't live up to the expectations people have for the spectacle it is supposed to be as an artwork, it remains "minor" literature and a minor art form, to use the parlance of Deleuze. In German, the word for boring is *langweilig*, "long lasting." This translation—which is ambivalent and layered—maybe describes my learning and reading projects very accurately. If Duchamp talked about fast, "ready made" things, I talk about things that form over a long time and might therefore be called "hard tryings" or "lasting longs". A university museum like the Wallach Gallery might be the place best suited for these ever-unfinished, ongoing projects.



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