

WAR AND PEACE

volume 4

Vision *and* Text

Edited by Judith Goldman and Leslie Scalapino

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Front cover: Susan Bee, *Diving into the Wreck*, 2005, oil and collage on linen, 52 x 68 inches

Back cover: Petah Coyne, *Untitled #1240 (Black Cloud)*, 2007-08, silk flowers, silk/rayon velvet, plaster statuary, feathers, specially formulated wax, cable, cable nuts, acrylic paint, black spray paint, plaster, chicken wire fencing, metal hardware, felt, pearl-headed hat pins, pigment, thread, wire, plywood, wood, 74 x 104 x 174 inches (188 x 264.2 x 442 cm), © Petah Coyne, Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

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We thank Granary Books for allowing us to print from color spreads of images and text from *The Animal is in the World like Water in Water* (2009) by Leslie Scalapino and Kiki Smith.

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Etel Adnan

I have not "seen" war

War is not a concept as simple as it seems to be, although it's a recurrent theme in newspapers and conversations, not forgetting its almost perennial presence in some parts of the world.

I can say that war has been a major thread in the tapestry of my life. I have a particular familiarity with it for personal/historical reasons. These go back all the way to WWI. My father was an Ottoman General Staff officer born, and raised until he was twelve, in Damascus. Born in 1880, the same year as Atatürk, he went, like Atatürk, to The War College, the military academy in Istanbul. His first assignment as a young officer sent him to Libya, where there was a conflict with Italy, then he was a captain in Bulgaria, participating in the repression of a Bulgarian tentative war of independence from Ottoman occupation. Then, he was posted in Jerusalem where he got involved in a dispute between Christian priests from various denominations and national backgrounds, about some rights pertaining to the Saint-Sepulcher church. World War I saw him in the front line of the Dardanelles where the Turkish empire defeated the invading armies of the British and their allies. He sustained wounds at his head and leg, and after his recovery he was named military governor of Smyrna.

He was 38 years old when his career ended with the end of the war and the very end of the Ottoman world. He had, in the war years, in a second marriage, married a very young Greek girl who was to become my mother. Their happy years together were short-lived. Smyrna did entirely burn in 1922 and its Greek population, the majority of the city, was obliged to flee. They both decided to leave, choosing to settle in Beirut, when Beirut was still part of the Syrian region of the empire.

So I grew up in Beirut with two refugees, two defeated persons: a father who was practically unemployable in a country ruled by the French, his former enemies, and a mother who never recovered from what the Greeks still call "the catastrophe," meaning the lost of Smyrna which was their last stronghold in Anatolia, an Asia Minor which is the original birthplace of Greek thought and civilization. Her regrets were not the result of high-flying cultural considerations, but a gut reaction to a loss that took her to an alien country where she had to live mostly in solitude and poverty.

Thus it is that I heard throughout my childhood references to a war I had not seen but with whose results I had to live day after day. The war years were, for different reasons, my parents' best years; they remained, in their minds, and conversations, a central period to which they referred constantly. I espoused my father's resentment of the French occupation of Lebanon, and although much later in life I wrote a book on Paris to settle accounts, so to speak, to disentangle conflicting feelings of loving Paris and rejecting it, I know by now that nothing has been settled on that score.

As my mother spoke Greek to me, I absorbed her world, a world I didn't know, I didn't see, and that had entirely disappeared. We spoke Turkish too, as that was the lan-

guage my parents had in common. Adding the French learned in school, I can say that I participated through these languages, in countries unknown, "far away," dream places with no ties to day-to-day reality. Arabic I spoke in the street, imperfectly, but it had at least a link with the environment.

My father and I used to go often to Damascus to his sister's house. In that silent, rather wealthy place, I was hearing political talk concerning Syrian resistance to French rule. They talked of the betrayal of the Arabs by the Allies, of the exactions that the French were imposing on the local population, of strikes and open rebellion . . . of the division of Syria by the creation of Lebanon by the French, and by the cession of Northern Syrian territory to the Turks by the same French. Always worries, resentment, defeat mentioned in hushed voices around dinner and tea.

My uncle was a fierce Arab nationalist, not regretting in his deep heart the Ottoman empire, but totally infuriated by French politics in his country. Once in a great while I used to hear the word Palestine, without paying much attention. Over all, they were all living in the past, talking on family matters and on the half-brothers and nephews who seemed to have all been officers of the empire. They were a military caste whose members chose mainly to remain in Ataturk's Turkey while the others returned to resettle in Syria. World War I was omnipresent in their lives till their death.

When I was an adolescent, WWII broke out. Beirut witnessed the crossings of armies made of Poles, Greeks, Australians, Canadians, English. . . . In the beginning, the French army was in control. It started to recruit the first women from Lebanon who were able to become secretaries. (I consider that women's liberation from economic dependence started right then, in Egypt and Beirut.) My mother had heard that they were hiring young people and through some contacts I was hired in a military office, having quit school before any graduation. I was barely sixteen. My job was menial: stacking papers in rectangular straw baskets. I had joined a war effort totally abstract to me. All I understood at the beginning was that men in uniform were coming and going and speaking of military operations.

I stayed just a few months in that office because the Free French Forces, created by de Gaulle, had taken over, and I went to work in a French Press Bureau run by civilians. (That's when the armies mentioned above entered Lebanon with the Free French.) At the office, I followed with the other employees, Lebanese and French, and on huge maps stuck on walls, the march of the Germans into Russia and then their retreat and defeat. By that time I had learned to use a typewriter and my salary had gone a bit higher. In the mean time, literally home-sick for school, I managed through few classes and some private lessons to obtain my baccalaureate while working 8 hours a day, and coming home at night when the city was, most of the time, under curfew. But they were exultant years that connected me to worlds outside the common knowledge of kids of my day and age.

That war ended in 1945, but was immediately followed by troubles in Palestine that culminated in the 1948 defeat of the Arabs and the creation of Israel. My mother, I am sure, never understood that problem. She had lost Smyrna and her world stopped there. My father used to talk about it with common people, the storekeepers he knew, or the family in Damascus, that he was visiting less and less. But he was deeply worried. He was thinking, if I'm not mistaken, that the old English enemy had created "a new

trick” against the Arabs. He was profoundly pessimistic. I was by then following courses at “L’Ecole des Lettres” (a kind of a French department independent from the University), and discovering, as if it were a revelation, the French poets still so utterly dear to my heart, Baudelaire, Gerard de Nerval, and Rimbaud . . . it dawned on me—that’s what I felt—that we were born to read poetry and that everything else was evanescence.

My father died in 1947. I felt at loose ends, while Lebanon had gained independence, and the French were officially gone. By the end of 1949 I was offered a scholarship for studies in France and on Armistice day of that year I was in Paris with a very small valise and a handful of francs in my pockets.

My first impression of Paris was of darkness. In fact, Paris WAS black—the buildings had not been cleaned for centuries and the war years were too close. I used to compare it to black and white etchings, given that sometimes after days of rain the light will show up, a vivid and pure light falling in oblique lines on fountains and streets, creating an apotheosis. I was drunk with amazement at the city.

I was impressed by the fact that people were constantly speaking of the war. My landlady was repeatedly telling me how German soldiers always sang while walking in groups through the streets of Paris and how she was closing her windows not to hear them, adding each time that during WWI she had fallen in love with an Austrian young man and that as Austria was then at war with France she didn’t marry him, and never married thereafter.

It then also happened that my closest if not only friend was a young girl my age working for UNESCO. I used to go to her home regularly and was noticing her mother’s strange behavior, for she was hiding in the kitchen or in her room when I was there. That’s when one day my friend Madeleine Alpert told me that her parents were Jews and that her father, a French factory worker, had been taken away in the middle of the night by the French police, and probably deported to Germany. He never returned and they never heard about him. The mother was in a traumatic state ever since and was refusing to speak to strangers. Madeleine and her sister and two brothers were members of the Communist party. She, in particular, was firmly believing that through the Party a better world, a non-racist world would eventually be possible. And through her I also learned about the deportations and the death-camps that took place during that war.

In January 1955 I disembarked in New York, coming on the *Ile-de-France*. A week later, I continued my way to California. It is in my student years in Berkeley (in the Philosophy Department), that I became an Arab, by joining the Arab Students Association on campus. That’s when I met also the first Palestinians in my life, and listened to their story. . . . Some had fought in Palestine and some were just students. All talked about Israeli atrocities, and about their lost homes, their lost lands. I became fiercely pro-Palestinian, and remained so. The conflict was continuing, not with guns, but with debates. I led some of those debates and lived the emotional tensions of people engaged in conflict. The war was going on.

In 1956 the Arab students lived, in Berkeley, the war waged by Britain, France and Israel against Egypt and Nasser. We spent sleepless nights following the news on different radios, terrified at the prospect of Nasser’s defeat and death. Somehow, the American government sided against its own Allies and stopped the war. Eisenhower became ever since an unpopular president. We, we gained breathing space.

In the meantime, the Algerian war of independence was going full swing. I was so involved with it that I had to be careful as a philosophy professor at a small college not to sidetrack my attention and lecture about the war to startled students! It was a period of widespread world involvement with liberation movements, a period of hope.

While the war in Algeria had still not ended, a new front was being opened: the American war in Vietnam. News on television, then, meant mostly war news. The recurring image of the Vietcong young men blindfolded, taken prisoner, and the straw villages burning, often with their people inside, were heartbreaking and haunting. A spontaneous anti-war literature broke out and one day I almost mechanically typed a poem on my typewriter and sent it to a magazine distributed freely . . . and when I received my acceptance slip I felt that I had become an American poet! From there on I continued to have some more anti-war poems published and felt integrated.

The Vietnam War was at its last stages when war erupted again in the Arab East, the (in)famous 1967 War between Israel and Syria, Jordan, Egypt. For the Arab world that was a major defeat and the creation of new occupations and problems that are still not resolved. That cataclysmic event shook me immensely, though it also isolated me, as very few Americans around really cared for what had happened, and this when they were not openly rejoicing.

Just eight years later, civil war was starting in Lebanon, a war that was going to last fifteen years on a territory not bigger than two American counties around San Francisco! I will not go into details but just say that I had returned to Beirut and witnessed the two first years of that war, and that will bring me to the point I want to make: I heard bombardments on precise neighborhoods, I mean on places I could see from my balcony, I saw from that same balcony rockets fly like hurrying red birds in front of my eyes, I heard about numbers of casualties, went to some funerals, buried a couple of friends, but I did not “see” the war. I heard that war, as if it were an ocean rumbling, but even then I never saw the exact origin of these new sound events.

War. Unless you are on a battlefield with an enemy facing you at short distance, like in the old days, war is an abstraction. It’s an environment almost virtual, you can search for it and not find it. People change during a war which happens on their territory, they are more on edge, alerted, reduced to day-to-day living, enclosed in their situation. Their lives become simpler. They live on survival level. Strangely enough, they become consciously happy to be alive. Catastrophe surrounds them but they never have a general view of anything. Everything becomes purely mental. Yes, there is war, and it means people are dying more unpredictably than before, that buildings are collapsing, that the landscape is changing under their very eyes, but something is going on “like before,” only that nothing is like before.

Even the young men who fought the war, who had weapons, or killed with their own hands, have little to say about the war. They have seen nothing, that’s what they say. That it was exciting, or scary, yes, they will admit. But what was it? Events, they will say, little events. That day I did this, that evening, that happened . . . and then? The answer would be: I don’t know.

Then, the very year the Lebanese civil war formally ended, we have had the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq (following Iraq’s own war against Iran that lasted eight long years!), the retreat by Saddam, the drastic sanctions decreed against the Iraqi people by

the U.S. and its allies, and the regular bombardments of Iraqi territory by the U.S. and England for more than ten years; and then, the coup de grâce. The matador's sudden final blow: the 2003 invasion of Iraq, with massive destruction and, after five years now, a million of Iraqi dead and wounded. . . . As I had gone to Baghdad twice, in the late seventies and early eighties, and was close to Iraqi artists and poets, it is a continually shattering experience. And still: what did I see and see of that war? A few photographs in newspapers, a very few images on television . . . that is not a war well covered on television for fear that the American people will be sensitized and start demonstrations . . . there have been large protests, yes, but they were very few in fact, given the enormity of the injustice, and the magnitude of the destruction.

That war is going on as well as one in Afghanistan. In the countries that are being destroyed, the people for sure know what it is. They are not only dying, but their culture is slowly being eradicated so that generations to come will be affected, impoverished, traumatized. They don't "see" war, they live it.

But us, in the United States, what do we SEE from what is done in our name? Nothing. There's probably in some of us, a mental image, a blurry awareness that something must be terrible, but that it's happening over there, far away. . . . Most of us don't care, in an absolute sense. No newspaper or television program is telling, with exact data, how these wars have affected the people who are the victims, but also the American people . . . in dollars, yes, but also otherwise, in terms of corruption and immorality not forgetting the soldiers dead or badly wounded. It has been kept an abstraction, something less real than the mileages between us and the planets that the astronomers inform us about.

Unless it is affecting your street, your house, or killing relatives and friends, war is a concept that touches the imagination slightly. It looks like a fleeting construct of the mind. We need the great epic poems or great novels to imagining it. And most, if not all, were written by writers and poets such as Homer or Tolstoi who did not witness what they wrote about. We understand it thanks to some movies, too. Otherwise, this most awesome of all human events remains fragmented in the mind and incomprehensible, unimagined, ephemeral and elusive. Let us give an example: Neither the President of the U.S. who took the decision, nor the airman who dropped the atomic bomb, has seen "Hiroshima." The people who really paid for it didn't really see it, but rather died instantly. The only person who saw it is the lone Japanese photographer who took a picture of it. Besides him, nobody has seen the war event called "Hiroshima." Some saw its aftermath, others pictures of flattened ruins. Nobody will see the coming wars, either. They will be faceless, commandeered from afar and people will die as if because of supernatural forces. They will be more "alienated" from themselves than ever.

I have lived with "war" all my life, I suffered deeply from it, I participated in some by writing a novel, or poetry, in indirect ways, in "peaceful" ways, but the wars themselves have always been somewhere else even when I was "there," in the midst of one, or on maps, in the imagination, on the news, as if to say nowhere. I have to search for it, seek it, because I share responsibility for what happens, but I need to create a vision of it, because I can say that I have not "seen" war.

War and Peace/Vision and Text, edited by Judith Goldman and Leslie Scalapino, is devoted to collaborations between visual works and poetry—and to text itself as vision. Volume #4 of *War and Peace* includes collaborative works of Charles Bernstein with Susan Bee, Amy Evans McClure with Michael McClure, Kiki Smith with Leslie Scalapino, Denise Newman with Gigi Janchang, a film on paper by Lyn Hejinian, Alan Halsey’s visual texts, as well as vision-texts by Jen Scappettone and Brenda

Iijima; Simone Fattal’s sculpture, and Petah Coyne’s “Black Cloud” (below). Judith Goldman interviews Marjorie Welish, Lauren Shufman interviews Jean Bouilly, Leslie Scalapino interviews Mei-mei Berssenbrugge. Also included are Etel Adnan, E. Tracy Grinnell’s homophonic translations of Claude Cahun’s *Hélène la rebelle*, and poems by Fanny Howe, Thom Donovan, Judith Goldman, and others. Susan Bee’s painting “Diving into the Wreck” is on the front cover.

