The Invisibility of a Bomb Ship: On Michael Baers’s Invisibility Chronicles, Part One

Saadi Nikro writes about Michael Baers’s recent work capturing the invisible mechanism of an impending disaster - the *FSO Safer* oil ship, abandoned off the coast of Yemen.

Critique / Saadi Nikro March 15, 2021

From October 9 to November 8, 2020, the Berlin gallery After the Butcher exhibited two respective works by the artists Sophie-Therese Trenka-Dalton and Michael Baers. Photographer and installation artist, Trenka-Dalton was born in Berlin, where she is based. Her previous work taps into architectural shaping of place, drawing attention to the monumentalization of urban space. Baers, a graphic artist and writer, hails from America, and has lived and worked in Berlin for almost two decades. Amongst his recent works is his contribution to the exhibition "Parapolitics: Cultural Freedom and the Cold War", at the Haus de Kultur de Welt (November-January 2017-18). While diverse in their artistic applications and mediums of expression, Trenka-Dalton and Baers share an interest in the graphic contours of installation art.

Oddly named After the Butcher, the gallery is described as an “exhibition space for contemporary art and social issues,” run by Thomas Klipper and Franziska Böhmer since 2006. As their website explains, it used to be a butcher shop in the former East Germany, and then lay vacant for a number of years. The building itself is one of the first Berlin houses constructed with concrete, towards the end of the nineteenth-century. This explains the permanent doorway installation of a cement mixer set in a cubicle of concrete.

12_MG_4878 Kopie.jpg

[1]Main exhibition room, After the Butcher
Photograph: Sophie-Therese Trenka-Dalton

Courtesy of After the Butcher

In keeping with the gallery's interest in the potential of art to engage social issues, Trenka-Dalton and Baers have developed their respective contributions around pressing concerns. Dubai Gold, Coir Kerala [2] is a video installation Trenka-Dalton worked on between 2017 and 2019, in the southern Indian state of Kerala. Coir, or "coco-peat," is the fibrous material on the outer shells of coconuts, used to make doormats, carpets, and to stuff upholstery. The installation focuses on the low-paying jobs of the coir-trade, undertaken mostly by women, and labour migration between Kerala and the Gulf States, such as the United Arab Emirates.

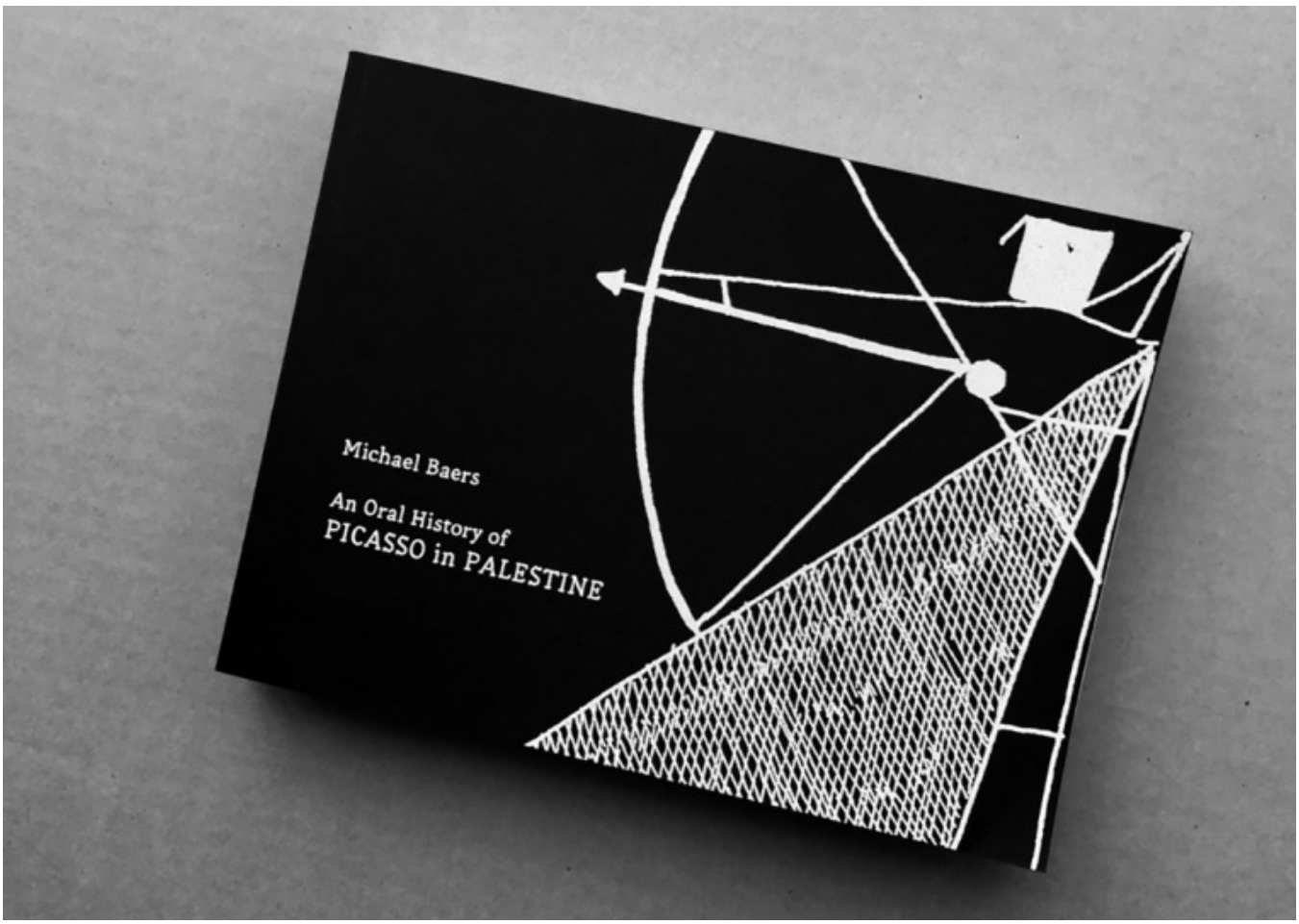
01_MG_4788.jpg **[3]**

[4]Video installation of Dubai Gold, Coir Kerala
Photograph: Sophie-Therese Trenka-Dalton

Courtesy of After the Butcher

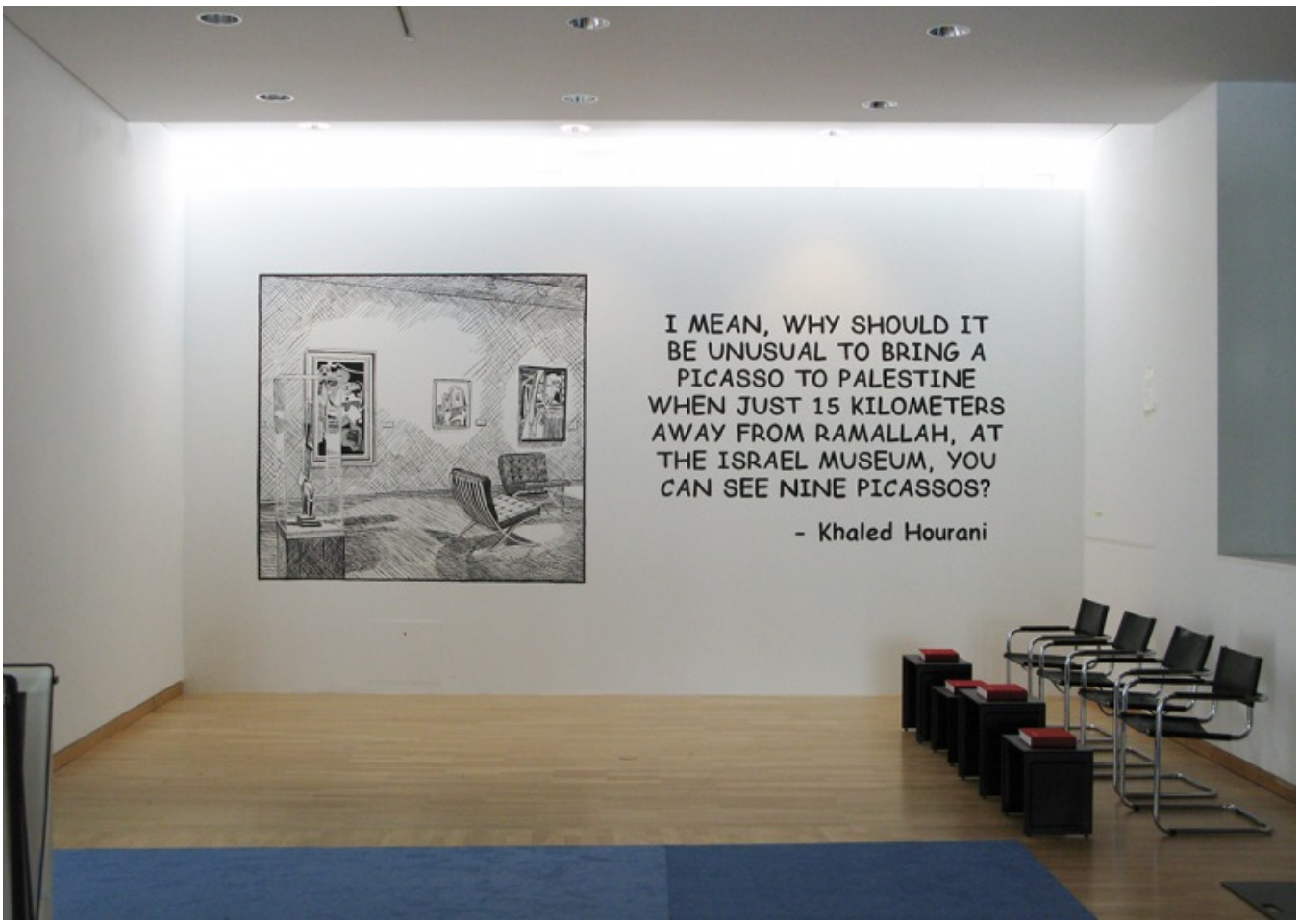
In the following paragraphs, I want to discuss Baers's contribution to the exhibition. Curiously titled *Invisibility Chronicles, Part One*, Baers' installation consists of 21 A3-sized paper panels, set side by side on a wall. The exhibition blurb calls the work "a graphic essay." This is because 11 of the sheets contain a written text, while the other 10 consist of complementary drawings. Both text and drawings are in black and white. This graphic mix is not new to the work of Baers, whose publications include the graphic novel *An Oral History of Picasso in Palestine* [5] (2014).1

pip_pack_2.jpg **[6]**



[7]Cover plate of Baers's book An Oral History of Picasso in Palestine
Courtesy of Michael Bears

Picasso Frankfurt.jpg **[8]**



[9]An exhibition of Baers's earlier project Picasso in Palestine
Courtesy of Michael Bears

The focal point of *Chronicles* is an oil tanker moored off the coast of Yemen, a country caught up in devastating war and violence. Named *FSO Safer*, the Japanese made ship (previously called Esso Japan), was acquired by the Yemeni government in 1988, and since then used as a floating depot for the storage and export of crude oil, servicing the nearby Ma'rib oilfields. According to a United Nations report [10], the *Safer* contains 4 times the amount of crude than the infamous Exxon oil spill [11] in Alaska in 1989, a major disaster of toxic marine pollution.

This comparison helps put into relief one of the main themes informing Baers' *Chronicles*: Where the Exxon calamity constituted a disaster taking place, in both the real time of the oil spill and its lagging mediated representation, the taking place of the *Safer* disaster, while anchored (excuse the pun) to the site of its mooring, is less fixed in its temporal eventuality. For the *Safer* disaster is already taking place, is already happening. It takes place as a slow process of the boat's deterioration, implicating the circumstances maintaining its decay, all the while covering its "invisibility."2

DSC_2893_web.jpg **[12]**

[13]Panel installation of Baers's Invisibility Chronicles, Part One
Photograph: Thomas Kilpper

Courtesy of After the Butcher

As his title suggests, a primary theme of Baer's *Chronicles* is how events and circumstances are rendered invisible to the extent that the mainstream media fails to endow them with news worthiness. As the exhibition blurb says: "What social and cultural consequences occur when stories of international relevance fall out of the media's hegemonic narrativization of the world?" To be sure, critical studies of the mass media have a long track record of pointing out how the media packages not merely events but the temporal and spatial coordinates by which "news worthy" events are made sense of. No doubt Baers has such critical studies in mind with his notion "hegemonic narrativization," an alliance of powerful nation states and the mainstream media in "heightening the visibility of some stories while relating others to this zone of invisibility."

However, Baers is more concerned with events and circumstances having significance in terms of their invisibility, in terms of a hegemonic narrativization that not only packages invisibility, but that in doing so fails to adequately account for the event that is yet to come, whose potential occurrence hangs in the balance of denial and what we could call *chronic* in*event*ability. In his script and drawings he suggests that the impending disaster's invisibility is twofold: the mass media's failure to raise awareness of a disaster in-the-making that will have global consequences; and, relatedly, the constituted invisibility of the chronic process by which the disaster is in effect happening.

The effects of this impending disaster are manifold, concentrated in the slow, seemingly inexorable process of their accruement, as Baers mentions in the text of his panels: "Standing offshore while a Saudi-led blockade prevented foreign companies from purchasing and offloading its oil, the ship's

hull and equipment rusted. Its engine ceased to function, along with the inert gas system keeping the vessel's 34 oil tanks from building up inflammable gases and becoming ticking time bombs." In this particular passage of his text, Baers describes the ship's deterioration in the past tense, all while well aware that the disaster will take place in the future, and can thus be narrated in the future tense.

DSC_2872_web.jpg **[14]**

[15]The large format reproduction of Invisibility Chronicles
Photograph: Thomas Kilpper

Courtesy of After the Butcher

For Baers, the *Safer* is, quite literally, a ticking time bomb, embedded in a political circumstance by which both the disaster and its narrativization are anchored in a zone of invisibility. Baers refers to it as a "ghost ship, a hostage ship, a bomb ship or ship-bomb." The ghost ship is not delimited by the physical proportions of the metal, steel, and other material of the ship, but extends into the circumstances by which it transpires as a ship-bomb. It is a peculiar kind of ghost—its presence captured by Baer's distinctly limpid drawings, which serve all the more to critically parody the invisibility of its impending disaster. "A hostage ship" dissimulates how the ticking time bomb has rendered succeeding generations and the future of the planet hostage.

Like climate change, both the conditions and consequences of the *Safer* disaster encompass the future-continuous, rather than the future-perfect (no definitive beginning or end, rather than definitely ending sometime in the future). Climate change can also be described as a ticking time bomb—a *chronic* event that will not only happen, but is already happening, happening in its ticking. And like the *Safer*, climate change occupies a zone of invisibility, referred to by erstwhile political functionaries as either a seamless event that is far off in the future, or else completely denied, evoked through a paradoxical prism of affirmative denial.

13_MG_4879.jpg **[16]**

[17]Dubai Gold and Invisibility Chronicles
Photograph: Sophie-Therese Trenka-Dalton

Courtesy of After the Butcher

Eerily, the *Safer* reminds me of the recent, devastating explosion in the port of Beirut [18], when almost 3,000 tonnes of ammonium nitrate, stored in a warehouse for a number of years, was triggered by a fire. The explosion turned the port area and surrounding urban quarters into a wasteland of destruction, leaving in its wake over 200 deaths and almost 7,000 injuries. Like the *Safer*, the explosion in Beirut was embedded in a political circumstance whereby the possibility of

addressing its potential to bring about disaster remained invisible, caught up in the machinations of a corrupt political elite and their cronies.

The Beirut explosion defied any neat packaging of temporality. Like the striking of a golf ball viewed from some distance, the action can be seen [19] before it is heard and felt. Video images of the blast in Beirut record the mushrooming blast before its force hit the unfortunate person spontaneously trying to catch the explosion on their phone's camera. Likewise, the *Safer*, the impending disaster yet to come, though well on its way, is, as I said above, *chronic*, an implacable recurrence bearing witness to its seemingly incurable political circumstance. Temporally "anachronic,"3 both an accumulating process and an event to come, the disaster foregrounds the irremediable split between narrative and story, between the time by which the story is narrated and the time of the story itself (a two hour film can tell a story that "happens" over 20 years). Baers' installation can be regarded as restlessly inhabiting the inchoate contours of the temporal split.

Damages_after_2020_Beirut_explosions_1.jpg **[20]**

[21]Damage after the Beirut explosion, 9 August 2020

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[22]Source: http://mehrnews.com/xSsTy
[22]Author: Mahdi Shojaeian

With his title *Invisibility Chronicles* Baers, then, wants to point towards the disaster that is already

happening. At the same time, with his work of art, he wants to employ the disaster as a disruption to the chronic narration of its invisibility, wants to situate the disaster at the utter limits of a graphic mode of address. To borrow from a famous work by French philosopher Maurice Blanchot, the disaster "is what escapes the very possibility of experience—it is the limit of writing. This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes."4

Blanchot turns the notion of the disaster on its head, relieving it of having to measure up to a temporal logic of a seamless event, to the graphic logic of its representation. The disaster—as the limit of description, as the limit of narration, the limit of a chronicle—would draw us onto the streets with placards, shouts, and screams. The disaster, in other words, draws Baers into the turmoil of working on a project of art that serves to disrupt the chronicle of its invisibility, drawing attention to the circumstances of its chronic eventuation.

What takes place in the wake of a disaster? How do disasters shape the contours of human subjectivity? What sorts of hopes and desires, conduits of social exchange, circulations of political sensibility, are implicated in emerging scenarios of planetary, site specific devastation and environmental fragility? How does the *work* of art (art practices and projects, exhibition, viewing and spectatorship) contribute to the shape and orientations of such scenarios and their phenomenological imprints, their embodied repertoires, their background noisiness—disruptively, affirmatively, ironically, and otherwise?

For Baers, at the limit of narration and description, at the limit of illustration, the disaster takes place at the limit of drawing itself. His 10 drawings exercise a semblance of the *Safer*'s distress by concentrating on the impending disaster at the threshold of a void, pointedly demonstrated by the last drawing in the series: a multi-decked galleon ship of the sixteenth-century, tilted, just about to fall off the edge of the world. The paradox, here, concerns not merely that the very belief in a flat earth is a myth (i.e., a story shaping the normalisation of belief; or, as the early Barthes says, a graphic exercise of "transforming history into nature"5), but that history could be reduced to a series of discrete events.

At the precipice, the ship bomb straddles a temporal void, whereby the story of its aftermath has yet to be told, has yet to conform to a narrative that would render the disaster a discrete historical event. "The outline of events," Baers writes in the last of his scripted panels, "however, only becomes clear in retrospect. That is, in the event's aftermath. To consider the event before its occurrence is thus to be held perpetually in the type of suspense belonging to the universe of filmmaking." In this universe, the story never coincides with the narrative. Through flashforwards and flashbacks, whatever seems to happen or to have happened (whatever we anticipate to happen) and the representation of what happens are always out of kilter.

Standing before his paper panels, one could mistake them for stone tablets, on which is engraved the graphic contours of a story long lost. And yet, for Baers, the story has still to be told, though not as a discrete series of events. For "before it is the science of the past, history is a dimension of existence," a dimension of livelihood ever traced by the errant contours of emerging stories and memories. We could thus speak of an after that is never after, but always becoming after, and perhaps of a before that was never neatly before, but always coming before. Between a becoming-before and a becoming-after, "What sort of language is available when a tone of narrative omniscience must be abandoned due to a state of emergency? Guess and expect to be wrong"?

The work of art begins in uncertainty and ends with a reluctant abruptness, always difficult to let go. It is a humbling experience, when the ink tracing a script or a drawing refuses to flow in the right direction. And then, the artist is haunted by a potential viewer who will simply look through their work to a historical mode of reference. As Baers continues: "Work in uncertainty, holding doubt, expectation and conjecture into some kind of form"? At the precipice, suspended over the void, the disaster hangs in the balance, formless, "pinioned between hope and dread." Without certainty, the artist can only "conclude a work without knowing its ending." Hence the haunting possibility of a part 2 to the chronicle of invisibility.

- 1. In 2010 Baers became interested in the efforts of Khaled Hourani to bring Picasso's

painting Buste de Femme (1943) to Ramallah for an exhibition at the International Academy of Art. Baers chronicles the difficulties imposed by the Israeli occupation, discussing themes such as history, modernist art and exhibition practices. Baers' book is available here in PDF format [23].

- 2. A relevant example, in the United States, is the liberal media's hysteria over the autocratic propensity of Trump (leader of the "free world," apparently), all the while failing to narrate how the US often supports autocratic dictators around the world.
- 3. To adapt a notion from Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.
- 4. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*. Translated by Anne Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, 7.
- 5. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. Glasgow: Paladin Books, 1973, 140. Further: "In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible" (157).

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