

Columns

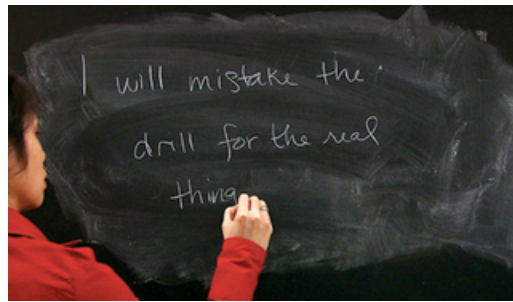
Changing the Subject

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON ON *9 SCRIPTS FROM A NATION AT WAR*

FROM THE LEFT SIDE of the screen, a hand scribbles a statement on a blackboard: “I will long for a break in the non-stop coverage.” Just as the writing is completed, someone else’s hand appears from the left to erase it. The board is newly filled and erased 248 times in the course of the hour-and-fifteen-minute-long video *Citizen*, one part of the ambitious multivideo work *9 Scripts from a Nation at War* by artists Andrea Geyer, Sharon Hayes, Ashley Hunt, Katya Sander, and David Thorne, recently on view at Documenta 12 in Kassel. Each different sentence is a “prediction about what I will do when democracy comes,” written by the artists from a variety of imagined subject positions. These range widely in tone, by turns cautious, melancholy, stubborn, and ecstatic: “I will hunker down,” “I will go off duty with a vengeance,” “I will harbor no nostalgia,” “I will put a face on the trauma,” “I will never actually change,” “I will prepare to release the balloons.” These emphatic first-person lines emerge and then disappear from the chalky surface like an urgent classroom exercise.

This video and the others that compose *9 Scripts*—*Blogger*, *Correspondent*, *Lawyer*, *Student*, *Veteran*, *Actor*, *Detainee*, *Interviewer*, and *Source*—ask how we position ourselves in the face of the ongoing war in Iraq. How do we speak about it and against it? And from what positions is such speech possible? Informed by critical-language theory, the five artists involved in the project have taken up related questions before, probing who exercises the authority to be heard and what happens to voices that are silenced. For example, Hunt

has documented the prison-industrial complex, and Sander has questioned the role of subjectivity for television news anchors. All five have also considered how historical memory is constituted, often delving into archives or unearthing documents, as in Geyer's research on early twentieth-century artists' model Audrey Munson, Thorne's work with classified CIA materials (jointly created with Julia Meltzer as the Speculative Archive), and Hayes's respeaking of Ronald Reagan's addresses to the nation. Likewise, *9 Scripts* is rooted in research, but it takes up the unique challenge of addressing the current moment as it is unfolding.



Geyer, Hayes, Hunt, Sander, and Thorne, *Script: Citizen: 248 predictions about what I will do when democracy comes*, 2007, still from a color video, 75 minutes 14 seconds. From *9 Scripts from a Nation at War*, 2007.

While these artists have worked together in other constellations before, they came together in this precise configuration for *9 Scripts* alone. They decided not to take a group name but instead continue to be identified by their last names as five distinct artists collaborating on a single piece—a method that also allows them to extend the project's meditation on how an individual's utterance relates to the collective voice. In this regard, *9 Scripts* is an outgrowth of their shared readings, writings, investigations, meetings, and discussions over the past three years. Because Hunt and Thorne are based in Los Angeles, Geyer and Hayes in New York, and Sander in Berlin, this entailed complicated logistical juggling, but the five received a 2006–2007 fellowship at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School in New York, where the piece took further shape. As part of their residency, they worked with graduate students in the New School's anthropology department. This led to the *Student* portion of *9 Scripts*, in which students rotate positions to interview one another regarding ethics, violence, and education. "How does the war change the classroom?" a student asks. "It puts more pressure on the things we're

talking about,” responds one student, while another bluntly asserts, “Not enough.”

This collaborative process reveals the artists’ interest in artistic activism as well as in radical pedagogy. And in fact, their project was partly informed by the intersection of those fields, including the politically committed “learning plays” (*Lehrstücke*) of Bertolt Brecht, which were meant to be performed at schools and community centers with the active participation of audiences. As with Brecht’s learning plays, *9 Scripts* interrogates the divide between speaker and listener, performer and witness. If the word *script* in the title evokes theater, the work destabilizes its traditional meaning, questioning by whom such texts are written and for whom. How does information (and misinformation) about the war implicate and recruit us as subjects?

For some of the people featured in *9 Scripts*, that recruitment is literal: The artists placed an ad in a theater trade publication seeking actors who were Iraq war veterans. (Indeed, *Script* also triggers the military meaning of the word *conscription*.) They then interviewed two such soldiers/actors about their experiences enlisting, training, serving in the war, and returning home. In *Veteran*, we see those soldiers in an informal rehearsal space, editing and practicing the stories that emerged from these interviews, as well as “performing” themselves in an empty lecture hall wearing their military uniforms. Retired Corporal José Omar Portilla links his desire to join the Marines to his passion for acting, as both stemmed from his interest in filmic representations of war. “The movies,” he admits, “got me in trouble.”

The soldiers and their stories are real—yet the fact that they are also actors raises questions about our investment in the apparent authenticity of personal narratives. However, not all of the videos feature subjects interviewing one another or reading their own stories; in the suite of videos as a whole, the relationship between text and performer is in a kind of recombinant flux. Other videos in *9 Scripts* feature experienced actors, such as Wooster Group associate and activist Tanya Selvaratnam, who portrays a lawyer currently representing Guantánamo Bay detainees. We see her

memorizing and then performing lines taken directly from interviews conducted by the artists with an actual lawyer. Likewise, performer Jason Westby reads excerpts from the online journals of US, Iraqi, Afghan-American, and Lebanese bloggers, in which these writers candidly state their fears and hopes about the potential powers of alternative media. The bloggers' emotional pleas to their audiences—"Help, anyone," exhorts one—stand in stark contrast to the footage in *Correspondent*. In this video, two US-based, Middle East-born reporters (real journalists, not actors)—one for Al Jazeera and one for Al-Hayat—discuss the mandate for "dispassionate" journalism and what is considered "objective" in different national contexts.

Perhaps the most powerful "script" comes from the Combatant Status Review Tribunal transcripts that detail the 2004–2005 proceedings against detainees held by the US as "unlawful enemy combatants." The four-hour-long *Detainee* documents a public reading, organized by the artists, of about one hundred pages of these transcripts, excerpted from the mountain of such material found on the Department of Defense website. Spoken by local artists and performers on March 11, 2007, at Judson Memorial Church in New York, the testimonies are an appalling revelation, even for those who followed the limited news accounts of these tribunals. The detainees are not allowed to hear the classified charges against them, and their indignation flares as the fraudulence of the proceedings is made evident. "This is not justice!" declares one defendant, Ashraf Salim. A reading was also held in Kassel this past August in conjunction with Documenta, this time translated into German and featuring lawyers, judges, and human-rights advocates as speakers.

This performance took place in the Documenta Halle, where 9 *Scripts* was also installed. Functioning as a general public plaza, the Halle is an educational space with no admission fee that, among other uses, housed the exhibition's lunchtime lectures. Within this atmosphere of distraction, the artists created small zones of focus, setting up individual viewing stations with headsets, like the clustered desks of a college foreign-language lab. The stations provided the audience with an opportunity for attentive, solitary engagement with the

work—not to mention a welcome place to sit down—that contrasted with the larger group show's imperatives toward mass spectatorship. The stations were carefully situated to imply relationships between the videos. The side-by-side pairing of bloggers with professional correspondents, for example, emphasized their differently affective modes of reportage.

The audience has its own role to play here, and it is a somewhat demanding one—the piece as it stands now consists of more than eight hours of footage; however, because it is primarily nonlinear and somewhat recursive, it invites viewing in a partial or piecemeal fashion. With its consistent aesthetic of crisply rendered high-definition video and compelling stories, much of *9 Scripts* is deeply absorbing. But, again drawing from Brecht, it also consciously employs many distancing techniques, including the artists' relentless cross-examining of their own positions. In *Interviewer*, speakers read statements related to the questions the artists asked during their conversations with the veterans, journalists, and lawyer. They vocalize the artists' internal dialogues, with all their hesitation, self-censorship, and uncertainty: "I don't know what I want to ask." As in the wiped-out phrases on the chalkboard, the work emphasizes such revisions and deletions, stumbles and pauses in language, and the imprecision of shifting definitions.

The artists are currently considering what future iterations of *9 Scripts* might look like; its specific realization at Documenta is unlikely to be replicated. Despite the title number, there are currently ten distinct but interrelated videos in total; the flexibility of the work's structure leaves room for other videos to be added. Further readings of the tribunals' transcripts are also planned. The artists are especially keen to pursue contexts for the work outside art institutions, in order to reach other audiences.

9 Scripts reminds us that encounters with knowledge about Iraq are in many instances "scripted," the result of tight controls on media coverage and the (increasingly unraveling) official governmental stance on the war. The grueling repetition of this dominant discourse, in which phrases such

as “the war on terror” are drilled into us over and over, trains us for complacent citizenship, but it can also set the stage for resistance. In this work, the artists show people writing, practicing, and rehearsing their *own* scripts. These alternative forms of meaning—blogs, interviews, speculations—are also learned and spoken by others, in a chain of reeducation that extends to the viewer. The piece helps us see how the history of this war is being written, edited, and reshaped right now—that is to say, literally *as we speak*.

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