

One of the hardest things to obtain in life—and often one of the most valuable—is a sense of how others perceive you. When you're a nation, and especially a nation people are calling "the sole remaining superpower," it's all the more difficult and, indeed, imperative. The best medium for this kind of understanding must be art, with all its openness to those subtle, complex, and barely understood thoughts and emotions that are inevitably involved as a new era unfolds. This exhibit and catalogue are profoundly important contributions to this human need.

Lee C. Bollinger  
PRESIDENT, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Timely and compelling, *The American Effect* explores the wide range of global perceptions of American society and culture in the work of artists from around the world. Encompassing both romanticized and demonized visions of the United States, these works—by 47 artists and filmmakers and three collaborative groups from 30 countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, South and North America—date from 1990 to the present and include drawing, photography, film, installation, painting, sculpture, video, and Internet art.

As America increasingly comes to terms with how it is perceived abroad, this book and the exhibition it accompanies at the Whitney Museum of American Art look at how artists, primarily non-American, depict, imagine, and respond to America and its presence in the world. The works convey a range of responses, from anger and antagonism to affection, warmth, and humor. Essays by well-known writers touch on issues raised by the art, and curator Lawrence Rinder discusses each artist's work in context.

WHITNEY

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Sergei Bugaev Afrika  
Makoto Aida  
Chantal Akerman  
Siemon Allen  
Gilles Barbier  
Stephanie Black  
The Builders Association  
and motiroti  
Gerard Byrne  
Anita W. Chang  
Patricia Clark,  
Meira Marrero Diaz,  
and José Angel Toirac  
Arno Coenen  
Gail Dolgin and  
Vicente Franco

Alfredo Esquillo, Jr.  
Fiona Foley  
Andrea Geyer  
Veli Granö  
Yongsuk Kang  
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HEAVY INDUSTRIES



The  
Global Perspectives on the United States, 1990–2003

# American Effect

Lawrence Rinder

Tariq Ali  
Ian Buruma  
Caryl Phillips  
Elena Poniatowska  
Sean Rocha  
Nawal El Saadawi  
Edward Said  
Luc Sante  
Pramoedya Ananta Toer  
Aleksandar Zograf

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whom he estimated to number more than  
1,000.

Associated Press

## FOR THE RECORD

Four of the six **South African** policemen who admitted to setting dogs on three black men in a videotaped attack were convicted of assault after pleading guilty on the first day of their trial. The two other defendants denied guilt on all charges. . . . Former **South African** president Nelson Mandela defended the use of violence to achieve political aims, just minutes after being made an honorary **Canadian** citizen for his role in bringing down apartheid. Mandela, who led the African National Congress's armed wing and spent 27 years in prison on charges of sabotage and conspiracy, told reporters that violent struggle was justified against what he called oppressive ruling regimes. . . .

The  
blow to  
legal  
general

## 'Survivor' amuses S. African viewers

**JOHANNESBURG** — The first series of the U.S. television show "Survivor" to be set in Africa, featuring American competitors trying to outlast each other, left its South African audience in stitches this week.

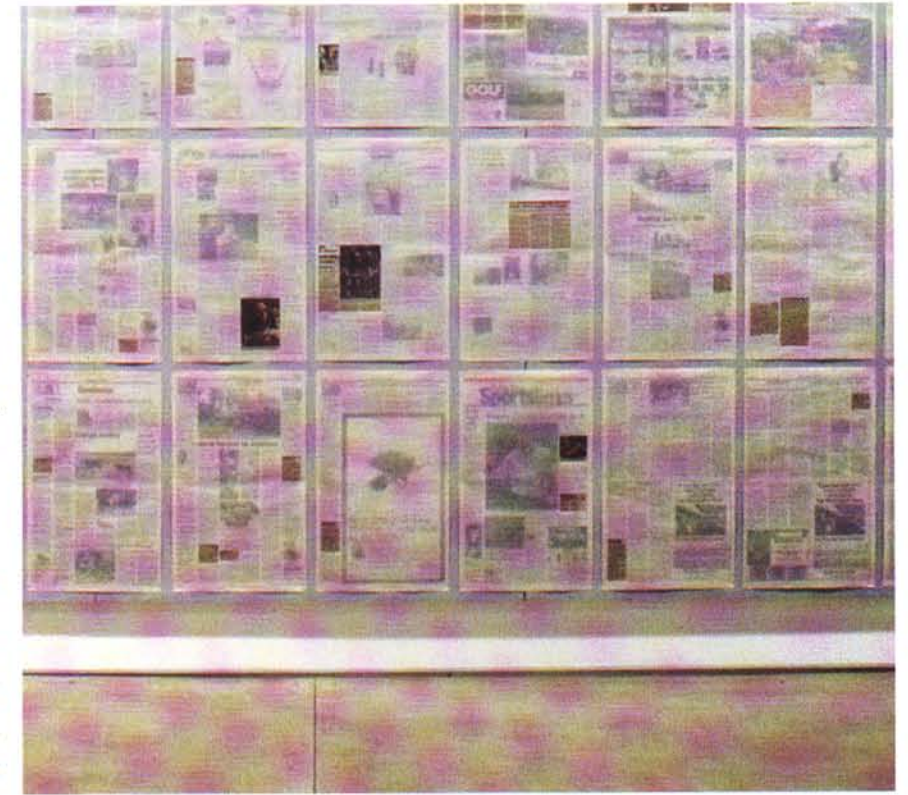
"Can the image of the American tourist get worse than this bunch of screechers?" asked Robert Kirby, TV critic for the weekly Mail & Guardian.

## Weekly notes . . .

A Rwandan former officer suspected of being involved in the 1994 genocide has been arrested in Senegal, the independent Hiron-



THE AMERICAN EFFECT



ABOVE AND RIGHT: **Siemon Allen**, *Newspapers, 2001-02* (installation view at Fusebox, Washington, D.C.)

divide.” Interestingly, the study notes, “antipathy toward the U.S. is shaped more by what it *does* in the international arena than by what it *stands for* politically and economically. In particular, the U.S.’s perceived unilateral approach to international problems and the U.S. war on terror play large roles in shaping opinion toward the U.S.”<sup>8</sup> Another somewhat paradoxical finding of the study is that “even those who are attracted to many aspects of American society, including its democratic ideas and free market traditions, object to the export of American ideas and customs.”<sup>9</sup>

What we are calling here “the American effect” refers not only to the material, cultural, and political consequences of America’s policies and activities abroad, but also America’s influence on a psychic, even subconscious level. The works in this exhibition explore the ways in which the idea of America has come to be seen increasingly from abroad as an almost mythic power. Its presence in the world can be measured, on the one hand, by the impact of the newest Hollywood movies or sports heroes, the volume of hazardous waste sent from its shores to foreign countries, or by the emulation of, or antagonism toward, its constitutionally guaranteed liberties. But it can also be measured by exploring images that represent a state of mind in which America appears to have the power of an archetype. “Archetypes are typical modes of apprehension,” explained C.G. Jung, “and whenever we meet with uniform and regularly recurring modes of apprehension, we are dealing with an archetype, no matter whether its mythological character is recognized or not.”<sup>10</sup> By invoking the notion of the archetype and positioning an aspect of this exhibition in the domain of the psychological, I do not mean to denigrate as fantasy the astute observa-

tions many of these artists bring to their very real subjects. Phenomena can be both real and symbolic, and indeed this is the special, complex condition that defines “the American effect.” Thanks to its extraordinary power, America’s actions are more than simple deeds; in the realm of the imagination, they embody the limits of possibility, whether perceived as good or evil. This is a powerful position to occupy, but also a vulnerable one. As the global hegemon, America bears the weight of humanity’s hopes, but it must also bear the brunt of resentment and, some of these artists suggest, assume responsibility for humanity’s shattered dreams.

In fact, America has fascinated the world for centuries, though initially not for its ubiquity and hegemonic power but for its perceived newness, uniqueness, and future promise. In his seminal study of American

character and society published in 1782, French author J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, writing in the guise of a successful American farmer, asserted:

In Italy, all the objects of contemplation, all the reveries of the traveler, must have a reference to ancient generations and to very distant periods, clouded with the mist of ages. Here, on the contrary, everything is modern, peaceful, and benign. Here we have no war to desolate our fields; religion does not oppress the cultivators; we are strangers to those feudal institutions which have enslaved so many. . . . Here everything would inspire the reflecting traveler with the most philanthropic ideas; his imagination, instead of submitting to the painful and useless retrospect of revolutions, desolations, and plagues, would, on the contrary, wisely spring forward to the anticipated fields of future cultivation and improvement, to the future extent of those generations which are to replenish and embellish this boundless continent. . . . Here he might contemplate the very beginnings and outlines of human society, which can be traced nowhere now but in this part of the world.”<sup>11</sup>

## THE AMERICAN EFFECT



Sherine Salama, still from *A Wedding in Ramallah*, 2002

PAGES 38-39: Helner Stadler, still from *Eat, Sleep, No Women*, 2002

October 7, 2001, when the first strike was made against the Taliban regime. Weaving together documentary and fictional narrative, Stadler creates a compelling portrait of the global reverberations of America's actions on a single fateful day: a billboard painter in Rawalpindi worries that the date set for his wedding may be delayed due to anti-American attacks on a local movie theater; near the Amazon, two miners' spirits soar when the price of gold shoots up; and an Egyptian pop star contemplates canceling his upcoming American tour.

Several artists examine America by studying its mass media. In their three-channel video, *The Golden Age*, Cubans José Angel Toirac and Meira Marrero Díaz in collaboration with American Patricia Clark present a selection of Cuban and American news coverage of the Elián Gonzalez incident. "During the video,"

they write, "the trauma of this particular child is developed, and one sees in the situation a climax of historical political tensions between Cuba, the United States, and the extreme right-wing Cuban-American community in Miami."<sup>26</sup> The piece is organized to echo the structure of the influential 1889 children's book *La Edad de Oro* (*The Golden Age*) by José Martí, the celebrated writer and leader of the Cuban independence movement. The philosophical basis of Martí's thought was humanist," note the artists, "and was permeated with the ideals of the French Revolution. Our work is designed spatially on three monitors to reference Francis Ford Coppola's version of Abel Gance's *Napoleon*, as well as the tricolor flags of France, the United States, and Cuba."<sup>27</sup> The final section of the video reconnects the Gonzalez incident to events of the recent past, such as the American-

sponsored invasion at the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Siemon Allen similarly reflects on the American news media and its relation to his home country, South Africa. To create his installation, *Newspapers*, Allen collected every issue of the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times* published since September 2001. He then highlighted every mention of South Africa, whether in articles on AIDS or reports on cricket scores. By assembling these pages in a grid on the gallery wall, Allen invites the viewer to compare the coverage of his country in two major American newspapers—one liberal, one conservative—and to reflect on the ways that American media outlets filter our perception of the world. In *Arrest*, Chilean Cristóbal Lehyt puts his own spin on various images recently appearing in the American media, including a Haz-Mat team cleaning after an anthrax attack,