

Rirkrit Tiravanija

Demonstration Drawings

September 12 – November 6, 2008

MAIN GALLERY

Curated by João Ribas

DRAWING PAPERS 79

Essays by João Ribas and David Rieff

Editorial Note

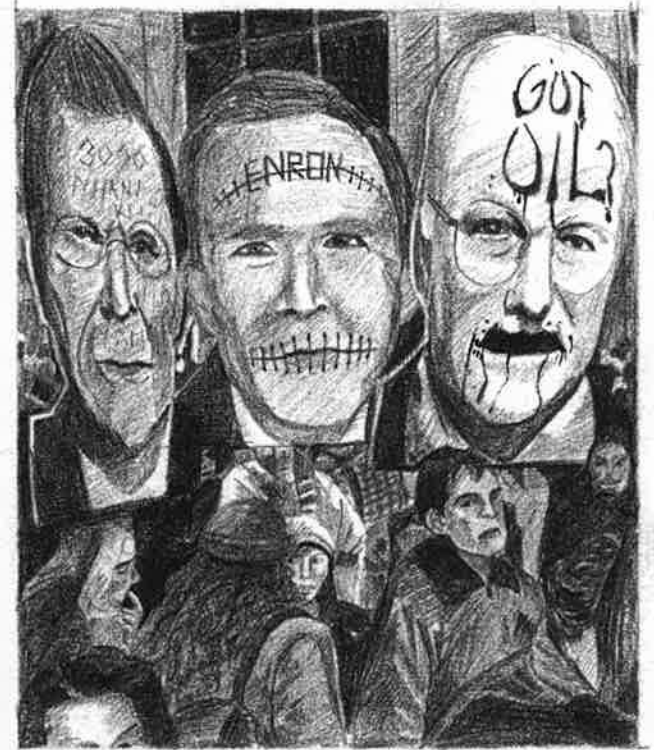
The Drawing Center's *Drawing Papers*, conceived in 1999 by then director Catherine de Zegher, have fulfilled their mission of providing a critical forum that would "interpret drawing as widely as possible, confronting draftsmanship with experimental work inside and outside the so-called margins of artistry, to articulate and emphasize the crucial role of drawing in the development of creative thought and the visual arts." Indeed, the series stands today as the most singularly robust meditation on the medium of drawing and its vicissitudes.

In order to better share this valuable resource, we have chosen to redesign the *Drawing Papers*. This new format allows us not only greater flexibility in the way the publications are laid out but also facilitates their wider distribution. Additionally, to coincide with the series' tenth anniversary next year, we will begin offering past editions as free downloads from The Drawing Center's website.

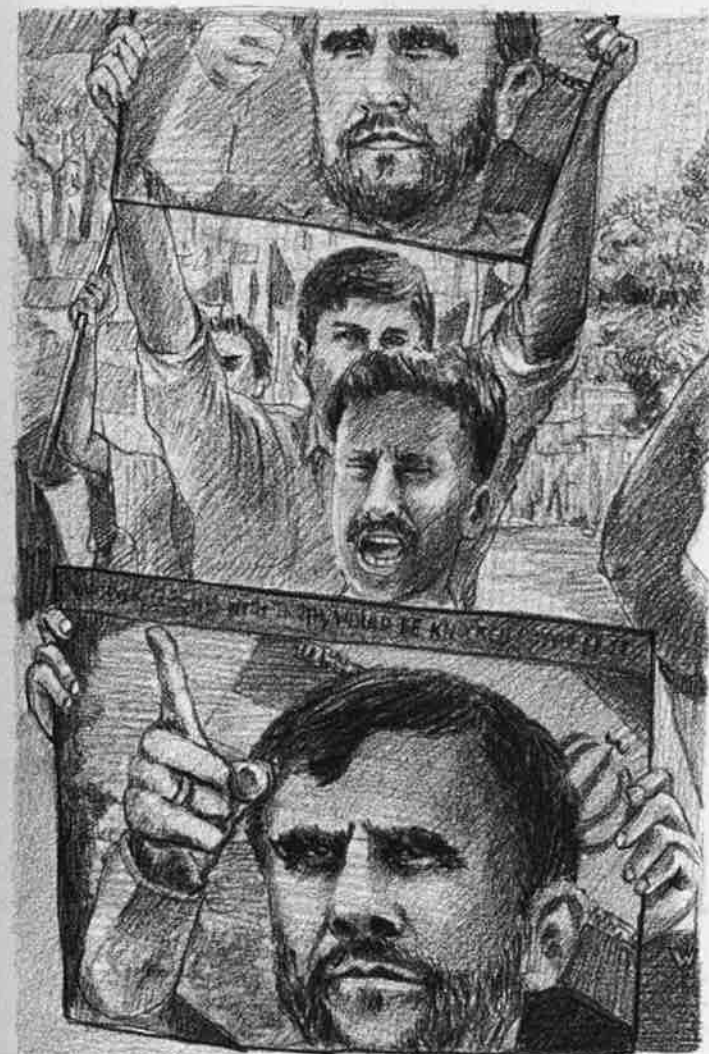
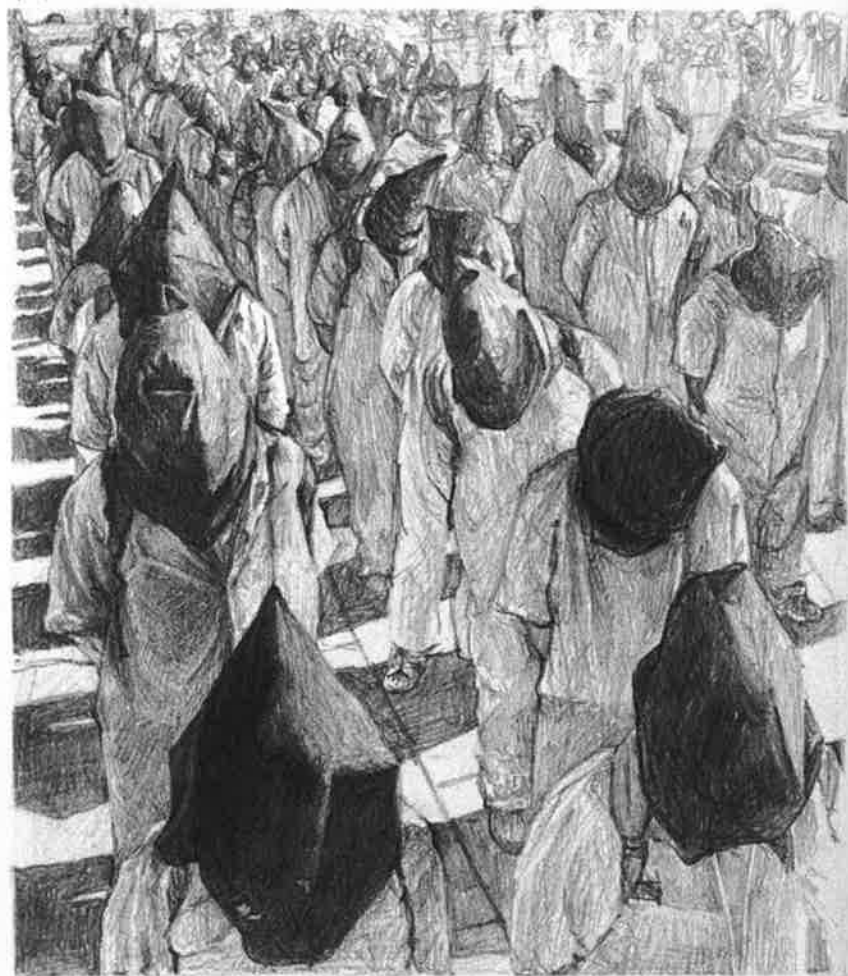
In the process of redesigning these publications we had to ask ourselves, How can a book best reflect an institution's mission and program? What type of discourse should it stimulate, and how would that discourse engage and extend the institution's vision and voice? How do we overcome the challenges of making a book that adheres to the highest standards and is still accessible to the broadest audience? Though these questions have prompted lines of inquiry that will carry on as we develop each new edition in the series, we did determine that, like The Drawing Center itself, what you hold in your hands is entirely unique. The *Drawing Papers* is and remains a means to generate critical discussion on drawing in its varied forms—from its most archaic to its most advanced manifestations.

Brett Littman
Executive Director

Jonathan T. D. Neil
Executive Editor







What Would It Mean To Win?¹

Rirkrit Tiravanija's

Demonstration Drawings

by João Ribas

Society is itself the tyrant...

—J.S. MILL

In an era so solicitous of liberty—of liberal democracy bolstered by the communist collapse in Eastern Europe—it is ironic its fruits should be denied to so many. The parity between development and freedom that underscores the concept of a market economy obscures itself in the crush of immiseration and the denial of political liberties throughout the world.² Economic liberalism and capitalist modernization apparently entrain, under the auspices of *globalization*, a set of rights and prescriptions more favorably turned towards global economic agents rather than the individual subject that stands at the

¹ The title of this essay is taken from Oliver Ressler's eponymous 2007 film on the antiglobalization protests in Germany.

² As Milton Friedman has argued, capitalism is a precondition for democracy, "a necessary condition for political freedom" even if not itself a *sufficient* condition for it. Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 10.

core of classic liberalism. The received “priority of liberty” so accepted by Western democracies as normative thus looks more like a disingenuous conviction—a noble lie about the free market as a necessary condition of freedom readily told abroad for the guarantee of economic stability at home.³

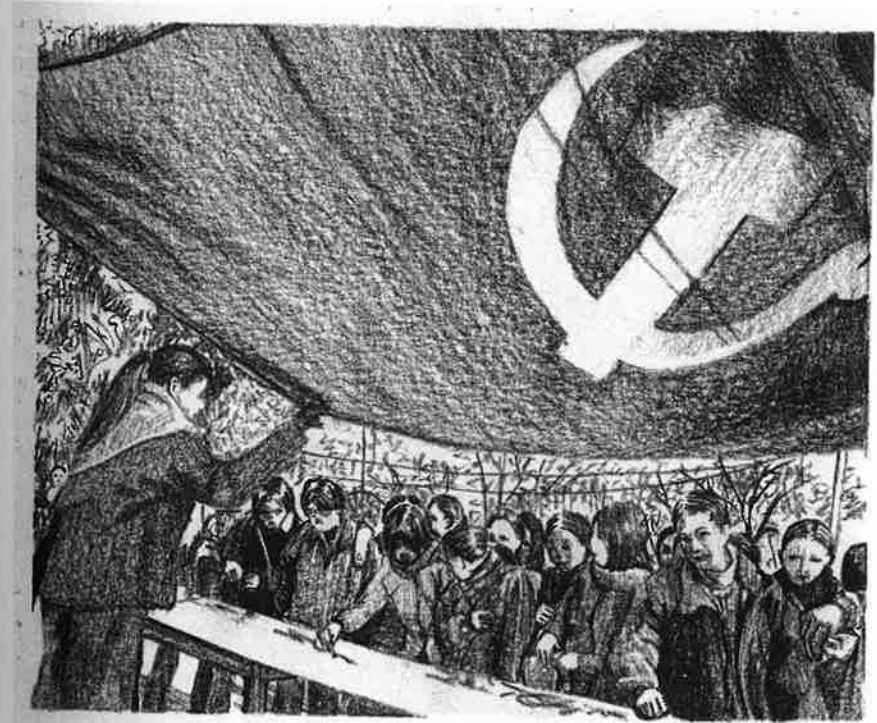
Intrinsic to this growing illiberality is a certain historical failure of the political left, the origins of which lie in the twin crises of left-wing politics in the postwar period: the embrace, and late condemnation, of Stalinism by the American left in the 1930s, and the perceived failure of the collective social movements of the 1960s. What has resulted is a delimiting of the ideological challenge posed by leftist politics to the tenets of economic liberalism, and the corresponding apotheosis of liberal democracy. As the neoliberal ideologue Francis Fukuyama wrote in the wake of the collapse of the Berlin Wall:

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.⁴

Standing at this putative “end of history,” the traditional left is thus deprived of a cohesive and legitimate challenge to the political legitimacy of free-market liberalism. What is left after the discrediting of the socialist utopia are set pieces of orthodox Marxist critique: capitalism necessarily creates inequality—that is, the actual operation of capital creates an underclass of surplus labor or poor, what Marx deemed an “industrial reserve army,” and the capitalist world-system will *inevitably* collapse under the weight of these insoluble contradictions. But what then is the form resistance can take against global capital today? What would it mean to win?

³ The term “priority of liberty,” from John Rawls’ theory of justice, foregrounds the perceived importance of guaranteeing the political precedence of classes of rights such as civil liberties over other social goals—such as the direct elimination of crippling poverty, for example. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* 16 (Summer, 1989), 3–18.





Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Demonstrations Drawings* stand precisely as a contemporary document of such a complex set of collective responses to the neoliberal order. The series of drawings are made by commissioned Thai artists, many of them former students, and are based on photographs found in the pages of the *International Herald Tribune*. The phenomenology of "the hand" that so determines the art historical framing of the medium of drawing—in its supposed intimacy or fidelity to thought or intention—is entirely sidelined. Rather, the evocative power of the drawings comes from their ability to turn an ephemeral image of strife or social conflict into a document of political aspiration. Tiravanija's mediation is to take a photojournalistic depiction of an act of political spontaneity and translate it into a medium defined itself by immediacy, both psychological and material. The result is a collective body politic depicted as an attempt to administer what Kant called "the greatest problem of the human species," namely, that of a just civil society.⁵

The drawings also limn into view two defining ideas in modern political theory: the moral basis of sovereignty (as Hobbes argued, there is ultimately no true moral justification for the exercise of a sovereign's power) and the issue of political representation (in the sense of the visibility of precisely who is not represented within the political spectrum). Part of the image of anti-globalization resistance is now fixed in the collective imagination by the "Battle of Seattle," Davos, and European G8 protests, all indicative of a shift from a traditional conception of social movements to new forms of resistance to transnational corporate power. These are seen as antiglobalist struggles generically opposed to the patent inequality, if not the entire ideology, of late capitalism. What the *Demonstration Drawings* bring to light is the emergence of a collection of multifarious, open responses of popular sovereignty—through the exercise of a basic political right—conceived more as provisionally sustained challenges to authority rather than coherent social movements. They are, in essence, depictions of the ongoing effect of global capital on its correlative

⁵ This "body politic" directly counters, then, Hobbes' classic metaphor, which models the state upon the "political body" of the sovereign. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. R. Flathman and D. Johnston (New York: Norton, 1996).



global civil society, the constituents of which necessarily include a broad spectrum of bonded or migrant labor, self-determination and postcolonial movements, anti-power, anti-war and anti-globalization activists, as well as localized protest actions and fundamentalist anti-democratic sentiment. Here is the return of the political in its fullest measure after the “end of the history.”

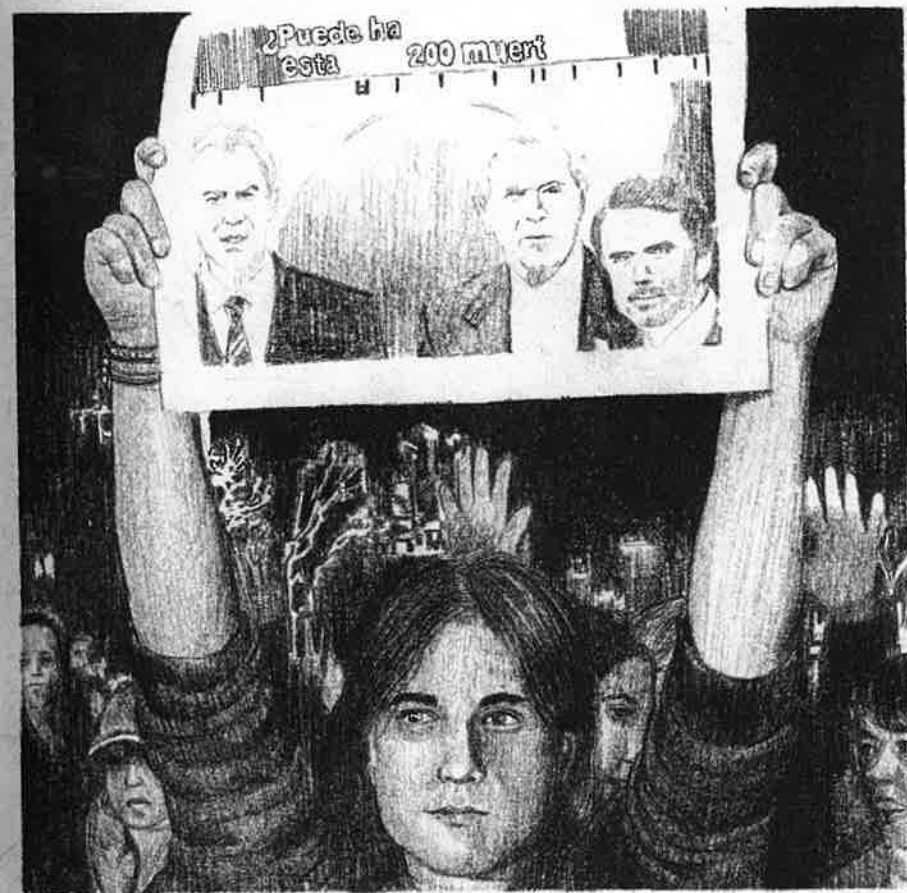
While protest movements and demonstrations are often associated with the politics of the 1960s, Tiravanija’s project brings to light an urgency that defines the relevance of such demonstrations in today’s political climate—the mirror image of capitalism reflected back at itself. Protest today may thus function as an instance of what Roman Jakobson called “phatic communication,” in which the meaning of an act is the act *as such*.⁶ This mirror image is no longer that of the classic revolutionary subject of class struggle, or of political mobilization based on the identity of a struggle, but rather a contingent politics of multiplicity—the open and inclusive social subject that constitutes what Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt call “the multitude:”

The multitude is composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity or a single identity—different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations; different forms of labor; different ways of living; different views of the world, and different desires. The multitude is a multiplicity of all these singular differences.⁷

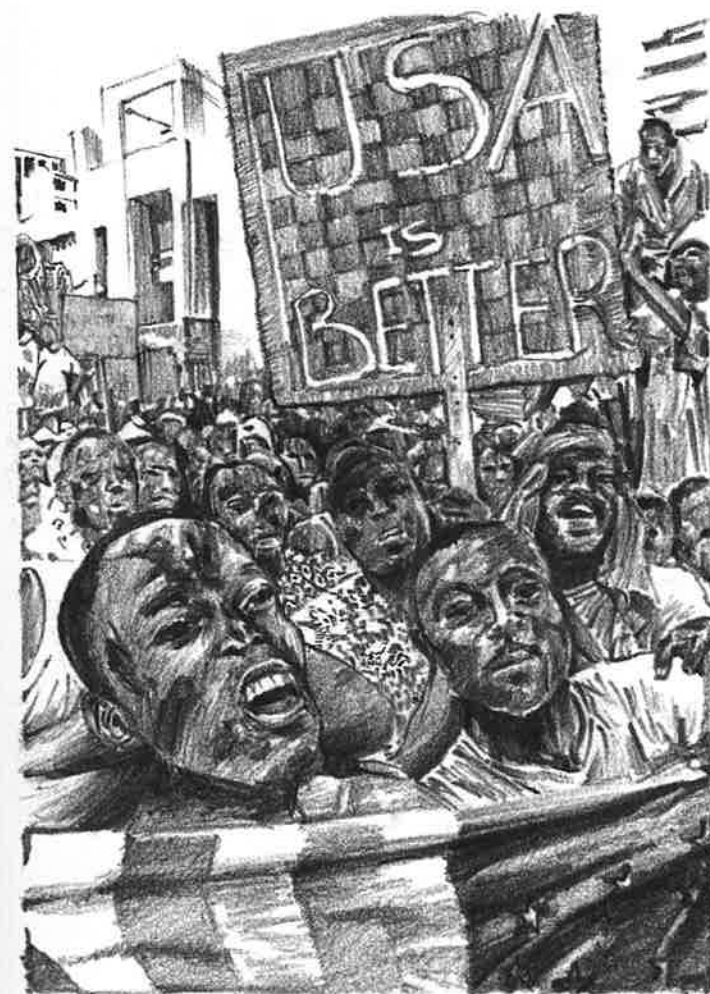
This multitude is thus the contingent political agent *produced* by capitalist globalization, the very figure of struggle whose coming into being the *Demonstration Drawings* depict—or better put, represent.

⁶ Or perhaps the fulfillment of the Lacanian premise that the speaker gets in response from the addressee merely her own image in its truest form.

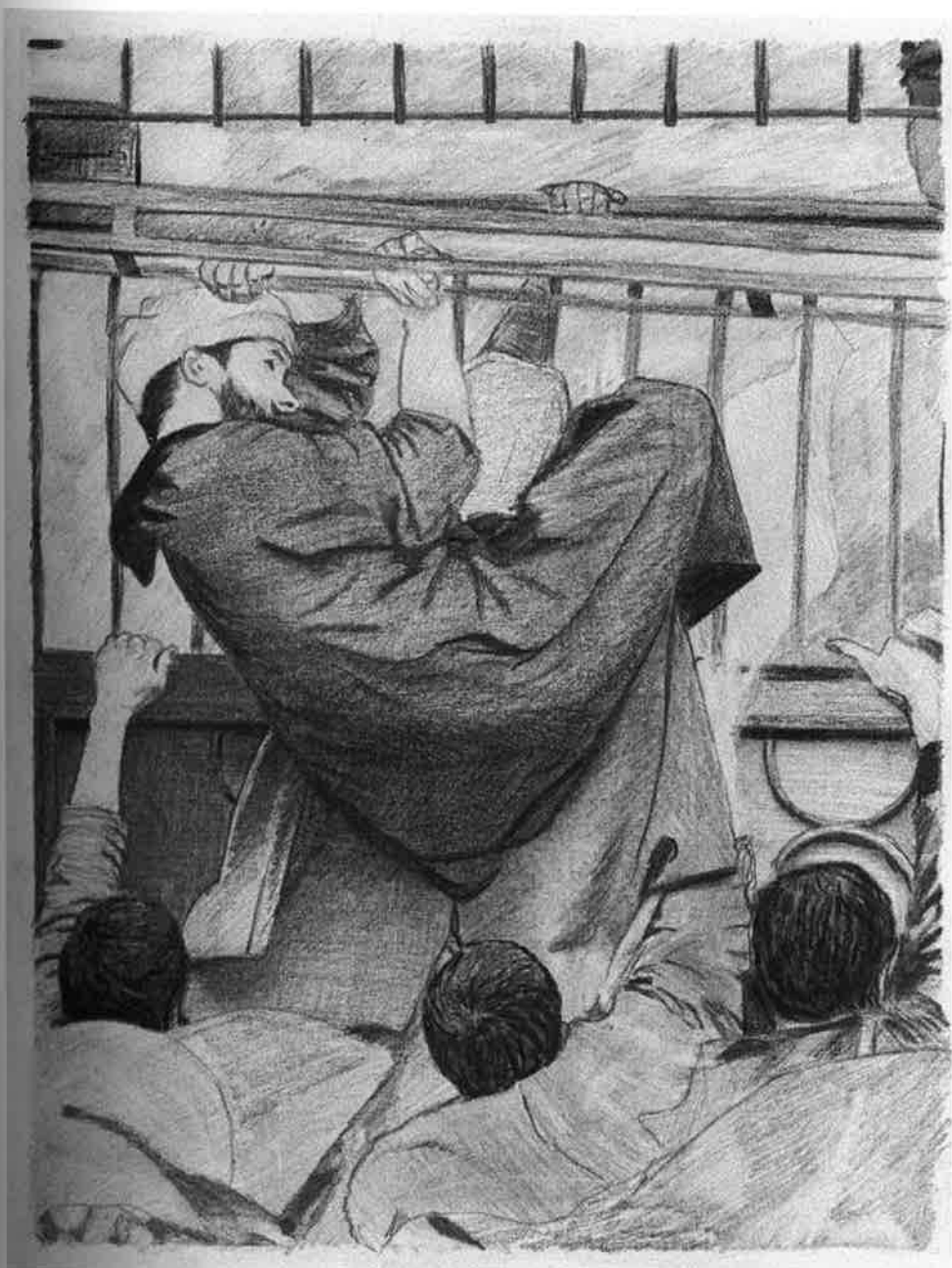
⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), xiv.











Making the News New Again

by David Rieff

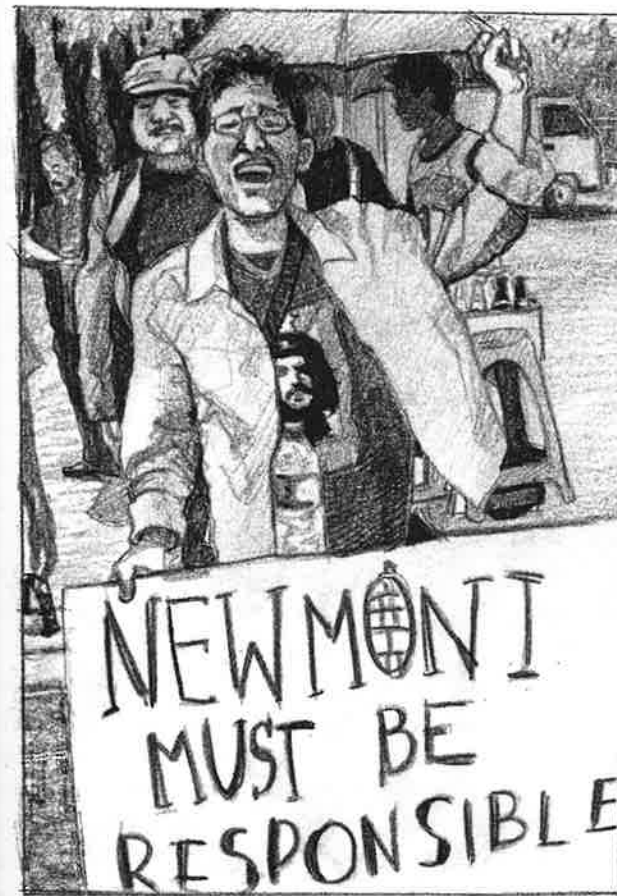
The news befuddles as much as it outrages. Look at all these tragedies vying for our attention: Hunger in Haiti; the Iraq War; a cyclone in Myanmar; street demonstrations in Japan. Ten years ago, the list might have been somewhat different; ten years on, doubtless it will be different again. But the basic structure of the story—a disaster, whether man-made or natural, is taking place somewhere ‘out there.’ The journalist, who in reality may or may not be an expert in the place where the disaster has taken place nonetheless takes it upon himself or herself to explain what is going on in authoritative terms. Such are the limitations of the genre—not least the competition for space in a newspaper or time on television—such an ‘unpacking’ is bound to be more sound-bite than seminar. And yet somehow we all expect both to be able and to have the means to care in a serious way on the basis of such superficialities as these.

Indeed, what is surprising is not how little people care, but rather how much—the young, especially. After all, we are not altruism machines (and about the young in our society, a bit of skepticism: they mostly do not have families yet to care about; often, they are instead trying to escape the bounds of family). Nor should we delude ourselves that we can know about everything that is going on in the world in any intellectually respectable sense. People spend their

lives studying Iraq, or Haiti, or Myanmar. What form of megalomania is it to imagine that one could have a serious idea of what is going on in these places even from attentive reading on the web, looking at photographs, or watching video? As I can attest from my own experience, most of the journalists covering these stories—and this professional term of art is itself an emblem both of what is essential and what is essentially wrong with information as a transaction in our time—tend to know very little about the places they cover when they first go to them. It is only after prolonged stays that a little real knowledge begins to stick and inform the reporting.

And yet people care. Why? Part of the answer, I think, is that they do so out of an idea of human solidarity rather than political commitment. This is why appeals to 'do something' have such authority, even when it is by no means clear what actually should and, more crucially, can be done. For anyone doubting this, think of the credibility, to use only two of the most obvious examples, of what we euphemistically call humanitarian intervention, when we in fact mean humanitarian war, with regard to Darfur, or to Myanmar after the recent cyclone (a far more factually doubtful case in terms of the human toll). What people generally say when asked—and the response is a tribute to their generosity of spirit if not necessarily to their good sense—is that 'something' must be done, that it is intolerable that we (whoever that 'we' actually is) stand by and let some terrible event unfold, when, precisely, we are aware of it because of what we read in newspapers, see in photos and video, and find on the Web.

Information thus serves as the ultimate goad to conscience. How could it be otherwise in any given case? And yet while it is true that most decent people *will* be moved, and will often demand action when confronted by any one of the human catastrophes of which journalists are the conduits, it is beyond the bounds of the possible to expect them to care about all of them together, all the time. Almost everyone who lives in a big Western city has had the experience of walking down a major shopping street and being accosted by young people asking for support for some cause—Greenpeace, Doctors without Borders, battered women, the homeless. And, again,



one would have to have a heart of stone *not* to care about any single one of these solicitations. But imagine that one were to encounter all these campaigners waiting like serried defenders in a soccer match within a span of one hundred meters. Surely then sympathy for all these causes in question—presented *en masse*—would necessarily begin to evaporate, and one's reaction quickly would become one of resentment, as if one had been obliged to run a gauntlet, no matter how well-intentioned those making the solicitations might be. By being confronted by too much, one would no longer be able to apprehend, let alone to sympathize.

Is there a way out of this? Can a different way be found to look—really look, not scan or edit even as one is looking, I mean? With the *Demonstration Drawings*, his collection of images of political demonstrations based on published photo-journalism, Rirkrit Tiravanija offers not a solution (realistically, there is no solution, only various fantasies about the nature of caring, the nature of solidarity, and the durability of focus) but rather a subtle and refined questioning of what it means to confront images of strife drawn from the news, both as consumers and as producers of these images. That is no small accomplishment, and the low-keyed quality, the rigorous discretion of the drawings should not be mistaken for want of ambition on the part of the artist, let alone want of importance in terms of the subject matter. For these works attempt to move us—whether we call ourselves good citizens, or witnesses to the horrors of the world who would like to understand better what we are seeing, or simply consumers of the news—at least some of the way toward better apprehending, though obviously not resolving, the conundrum—moral, political, to some degree aesthetic as well—of how to understand what we are seeing when we look at the news.

By both the way in which these images were made, assembled, and exhibited, and the implicit challenge they offer to the ways in which we are accustomed to seeing—though, remarkably, in what at first look seems like extraordinarily gentle terms—Tiravanija both replicates the *profusion* of images, the surfeit of information, that is at the heart of what it means to 'follow the news' (this commonplace

phrase is far apter than it is meant to be), and also challenges it. There is something of Bertold Brecht's celebrated 'alienation effect' at work here. Tiravanija is as inward as Brecht was strident. But as with Brecht, the artificiality of Tiravanija's practice and the ways in which the images of the *Demonstration Drawings* reject the realism of mimesis, bring out the underlying reality far more hectically and convincingly than many more conventionally realist depictions are capable of doing.

Tiravanija accomplishes this in some measure simply by his refusal of authorship. Instead of taking newspaper images—in the case of the *Demonstration Drawings*, images that appeared in the pages of the *International Herald Tribune*—and then himself making drawings based on them, the artist engaged Thai art students, many of whom could have themselves participated in these demonstrations, to make the drawings. The paradox (and the pathos), self-evidently, is that these students did not have the international journalist's remove from the subject matter. Often they were making drawings of a political event in their own country—one that affected their own destinies and that of their loved-ones, neighbors, and fellow-citizens. And yet for all their engagement, the works have their own distance, their own estrangement from what they depict. Indeed, there are moments when the viewer may be surprised by the degree of emotional compatibility between photographic original and its drawn interpretation.

The drawings also cast into sharp relief an old question in photo-journalism, that of how important captions are to understanding a news photograph. This question takes the form of asking, for example, whether an image of Nazi soldiers suffering from frostbite requires captioning because, without it, the viewer may sympathize too much? The photos that the commissioned artists based their drawings on were profusely captioned; indeed, the captions were themselves 'mini'-news stories. But in the *Demonstration Drawings*, the images seem to have a very different and specific gravity. Tiravanija is well-known for his interest in changing the terms of reference of the making of art, and on one level at least this 'decentering' in the



drawings is a function of that project. But for working journalists, and, for that matter, in the context of journalism more generally, it has a very unsettling effect. Given the ambiguities of the profession, that can only be a good thing.

And for a working journalist like myself, it is probably not surprising that these sober, unassuming works stay in the memory long after one has stopped looking at the drawings themselves. If there is no mistaking the essential question that Tiravanija's work asks—what are we actually doing when we look at the political sufferings and passions of people whose experiences we never have and for the most part are never likely to share?—there is also no mistaking how unsettling his gloss on photographs is when one returns to looking at the photographs themselves. Journalists are hardly without questions about what they do (self-flagellation being part and parcel of the profession, at least once the initial euphoria of the job has worn off and the moral doubts about what the voyeurism of what one does—whatever other, better things one also does—sets in, as it almost invariably will). But in my experience, at least, most are at a loss to know how to think about the ambiguities inscribed in the DNA of the profession.

What we know for certain is that the problem is by no means as 'contemporary' as we sometimes (choose to?) assume. Indeed, the strangeness of being able to see, if not in real time then without too long a delay, the news unfolding was clear at least as far back as Baudelaire. In one of his despondent late diary entries, he vents his spleen on the bourgeois sitting comfortably at the breakfast table, opening his newspapers, and, between bites and slurps, scanning its pages for disaster and catastrophe culled from every corner of the globe. All of this before the advent of photo-journalism (though not of photography itself, which, above all in the work of Nadar, famously fascinated Baudelaire), let alone of film, video, the internet, 3G, etc. The fact that in our time the availability, instantaneousness, and ubiquity of information, increasingly in the form of images rather than text—perhaps the most significant difference when all is said and done between our time and Baudelaire's—is so much greater



does not change the essential terms of the challenge that the surfeit of information now poses to understanding. "The old complaints, the old complaints are best," Beckett wrote, and he was right.

So we wrestle with the same problem as Baudelaire, and often with far less clarity. But at our best, we are prey to the same indignation, and the same disgust, but also the same perplexity. What are we to do with, or make of, all these images of far away political passions that we can access with such ease and understand with such difficulty? That is what makes Tiravanija's project such a welcome *interruption* of the standard pathways along which our difficulties take us.

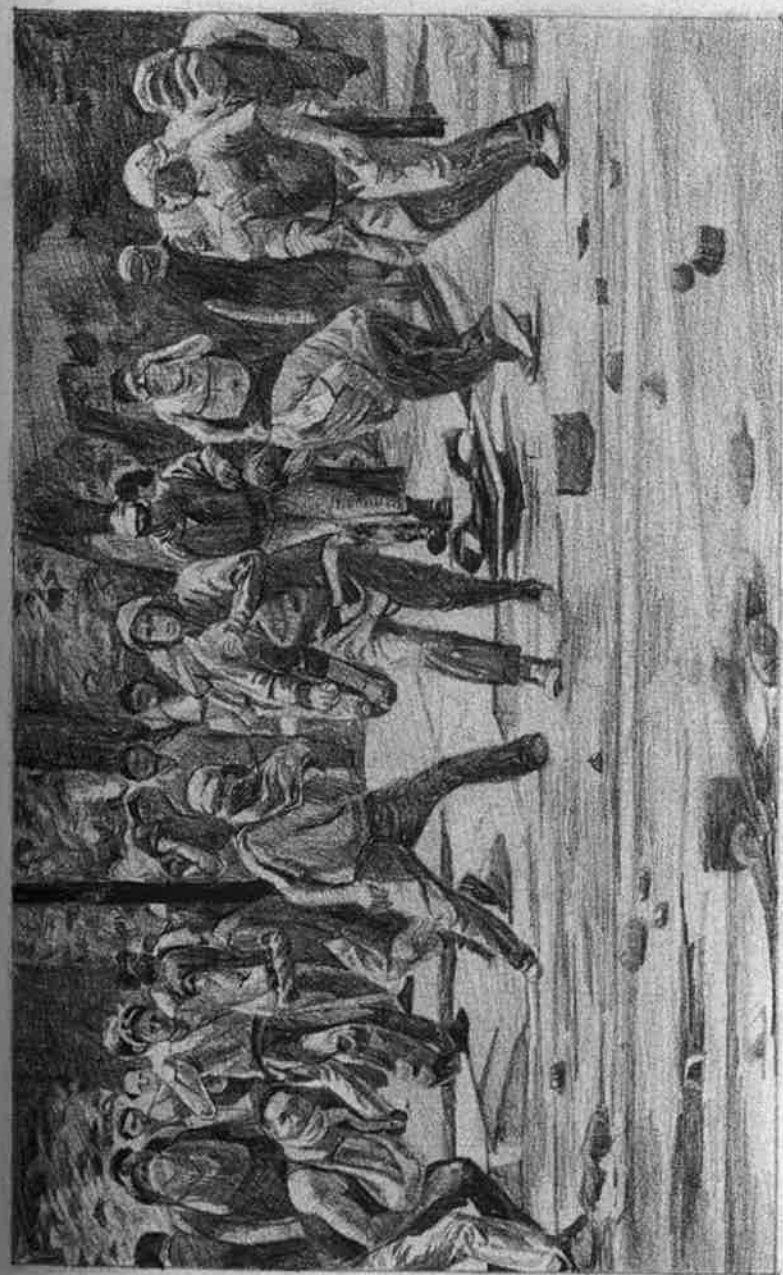
Certainly, knowledge is not enough. In any case, whatever the wishful thinking of political activists and the fantasies of the young, only a few geniuses and monomaniacs (they are not always different, of course) are going to be able to know more than a passing bit about political developments the world over. The environmentalist is unlikely to have much time to devote to the problems of child soldiers, and the expert in global hunger unlikely to know very much about Jihadism. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with this. Indeed, to expect people to know about everything, to care about everything, is really to make an inhuman demand for what, if realized, would amount to a kind of moralizing voyeurism—a mirror image, no matter how wrapped in septic sheets, of piety and concern for 'humanity' (whatever that word so largely emptied of meaning after centuries of misuse actually signifies), of Baudelaire's complacent bourgeois 'tut-tutting' over a coup d'état, an exploding volcano, or the outbreak of a war over breakfast.

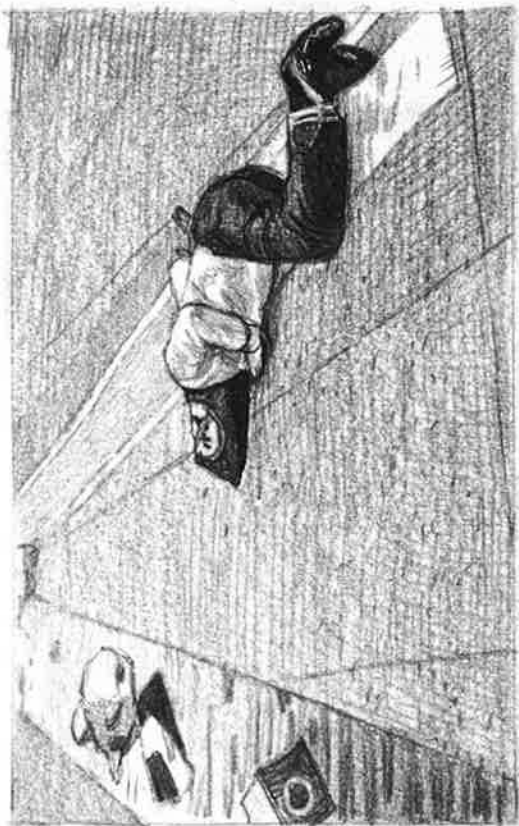
Of course, this is not the way things *feel* when one is living through a disaster or even when one is reporting on it. When I first arrived in Sarajevo in the late-fall of 1992, it seemed inconceivable to the citizens of the besieged Bosnian capital that people in the world outside the war zone could not be haunted by their sufferings. And of course some were. But in the main, what was most striking about leaving Bosnia for Italy, or Germany, or the US was how little people cared, even though—because we in the media were obsessed with the

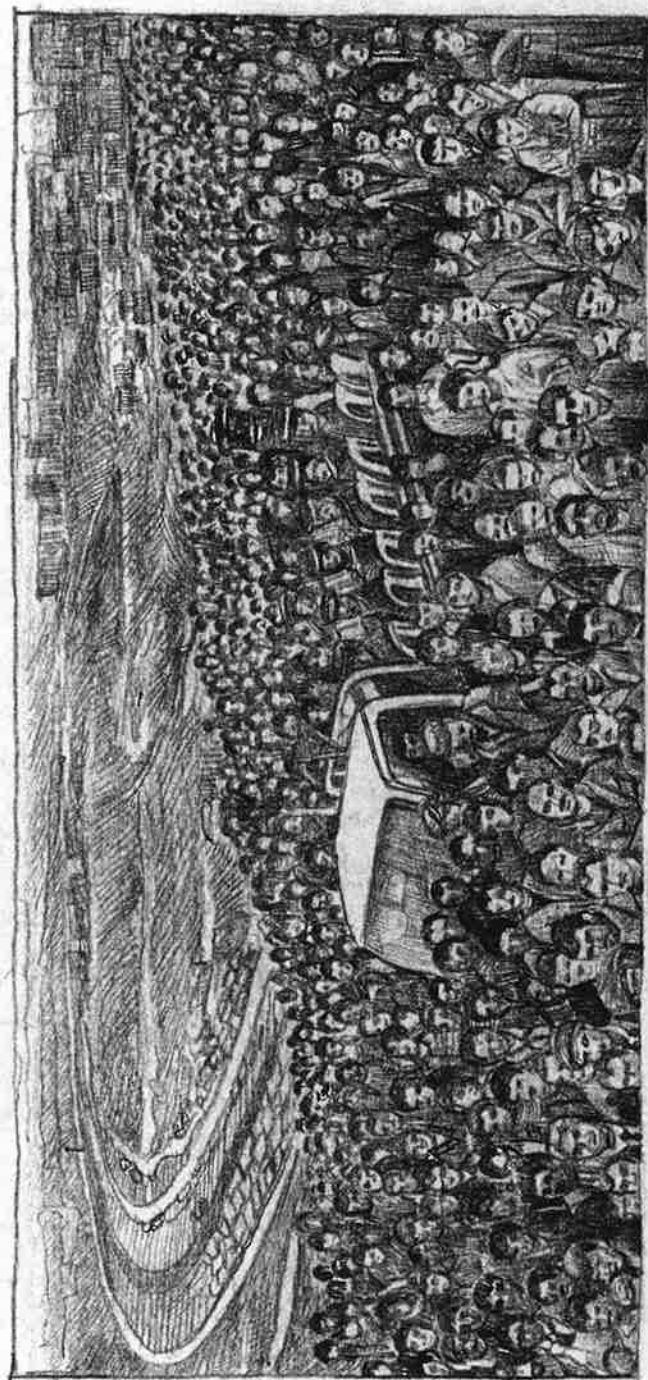
Bosnian story—for much of the war images and text about what was taking place often led the evening news or grimaced back from the front page of the newspaper. People like me soon learned that, when we came home, it was usually an exercise in futility to try to convey what Sarajevo was like other than to activists, specialists, refugees, or others with reason to care. What those who had not experienced the war felt was that they were being lectured (they were not wrong), and put in a position of moral inferiority. It was a Catch-22: we who had been to the killing fields resented those who had not for not caring enough, while those who had not been resented us for our moral high-handedness (they were not wrong about that either).

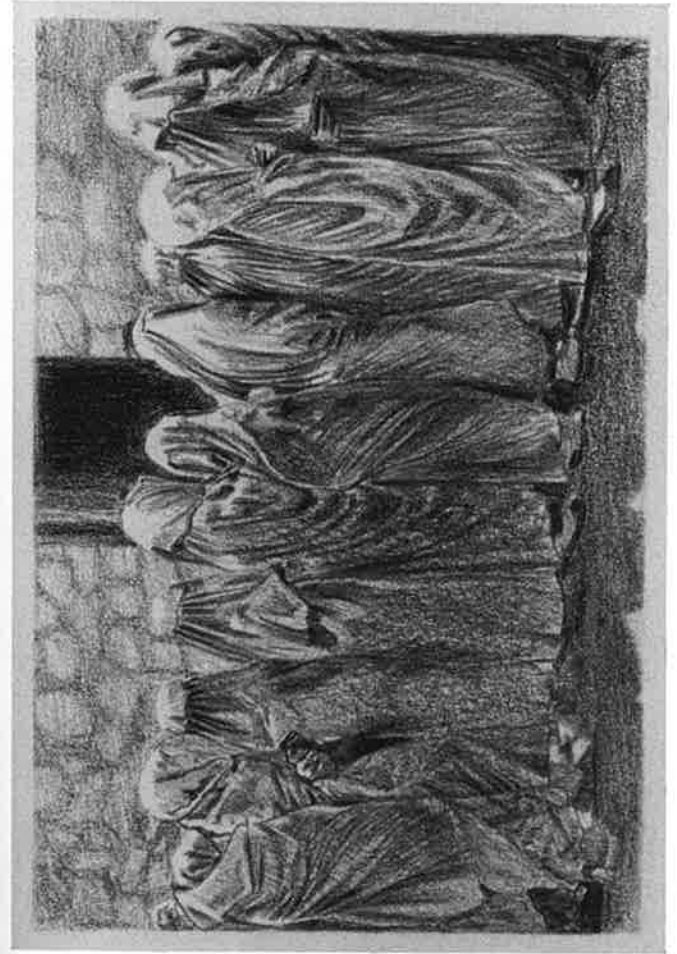
And yet if I am being honest, I must emphasize that Bosnia was scarcely the only disaster taking place in the world—and although the desire to establish hierarchies of suffering is always a morally invidious exercise—by no means the worst (it *was* the most incongruous, but that was because of its 'man bites dog' quality—wars, after all, were not supposed to happen in Europe anymore). Were I or my colleagues thinking about Somalia, or Myanmar, or child labor in India, or worker's safety in China at the time? Of course not; even we, professional observers of catastrophe did not have room for all of these disasters. And if we didn't, how could we reasonably expect our audience to do so or ever to know enough about what was taking place (often 'befalling' seems a more apposite characterization) in such places?

The problem here is not the expected one of insufficient skepticism. In 2008, what with Photoshop as only an emblem of the plasticity of virtual reality, skepticism is emphatically *not* our problem. Instead, what we need is both more modesty and more intelligence. The gift that Rirkrit Tiravanija gives us, producers and consumers of the news alike, is a door into both. And if the best advice one can usually give these days is 'reader (or viewer) beware,' for once it is possible to say, 'viewer, look closely.'

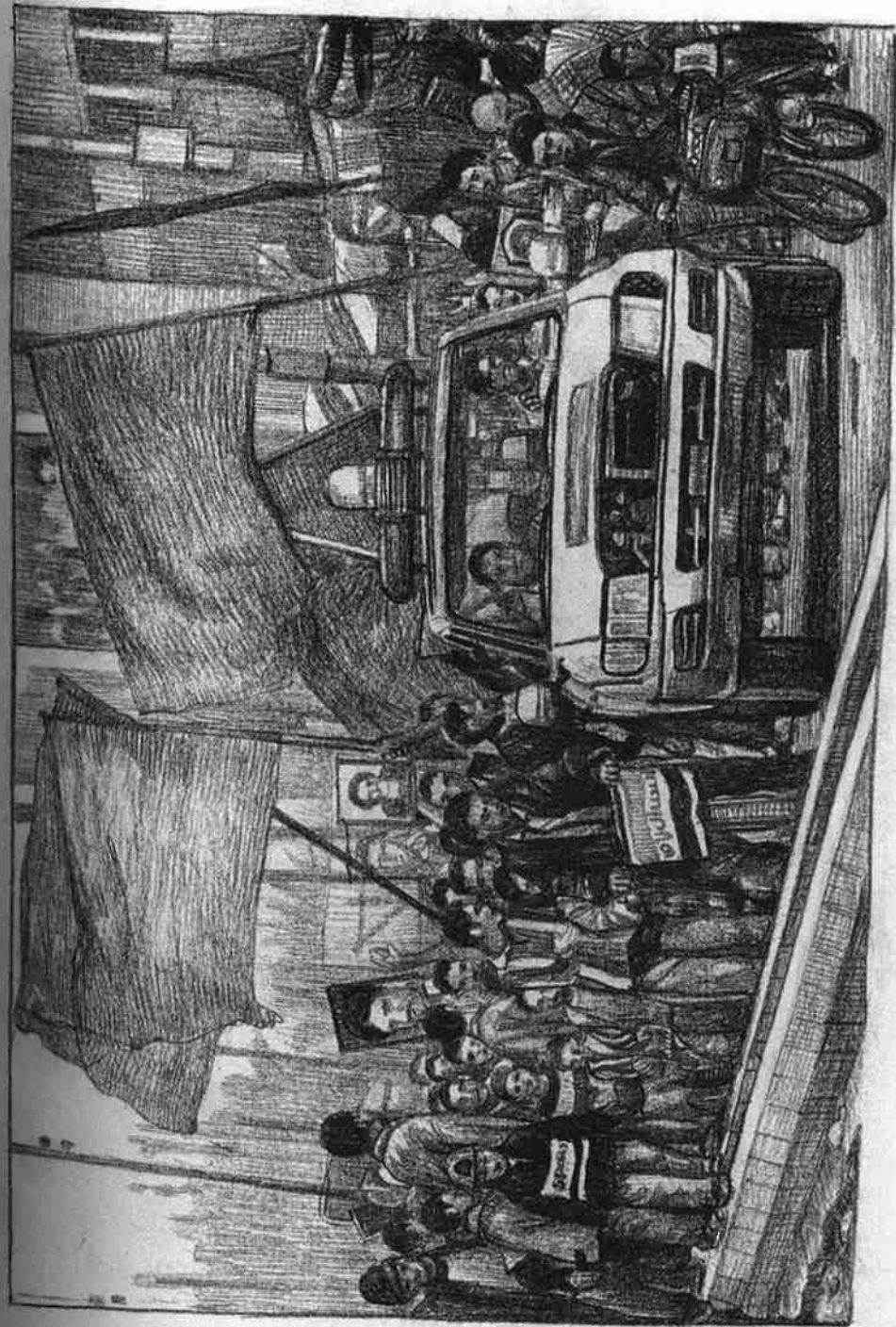


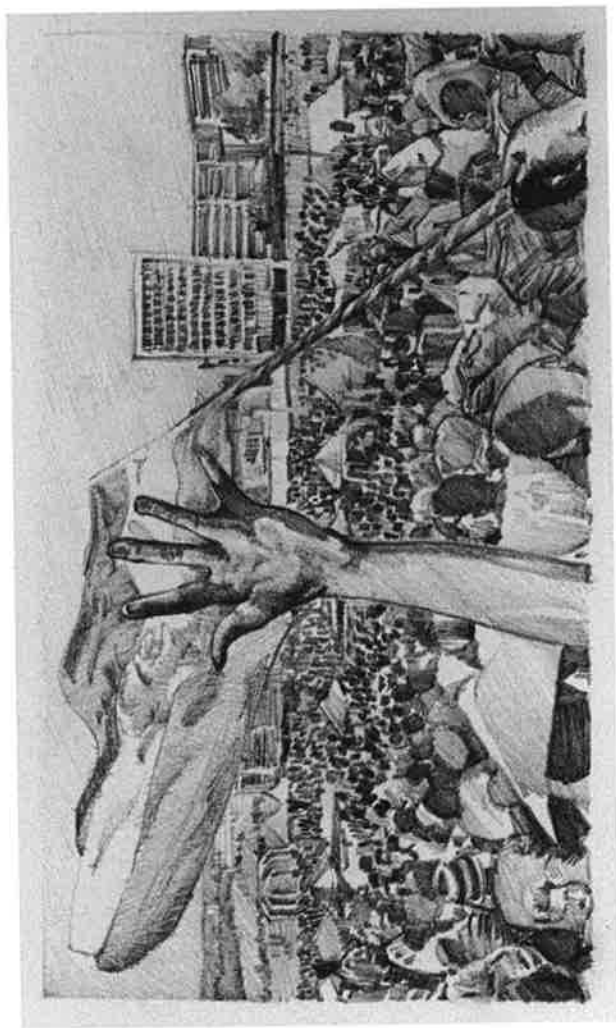


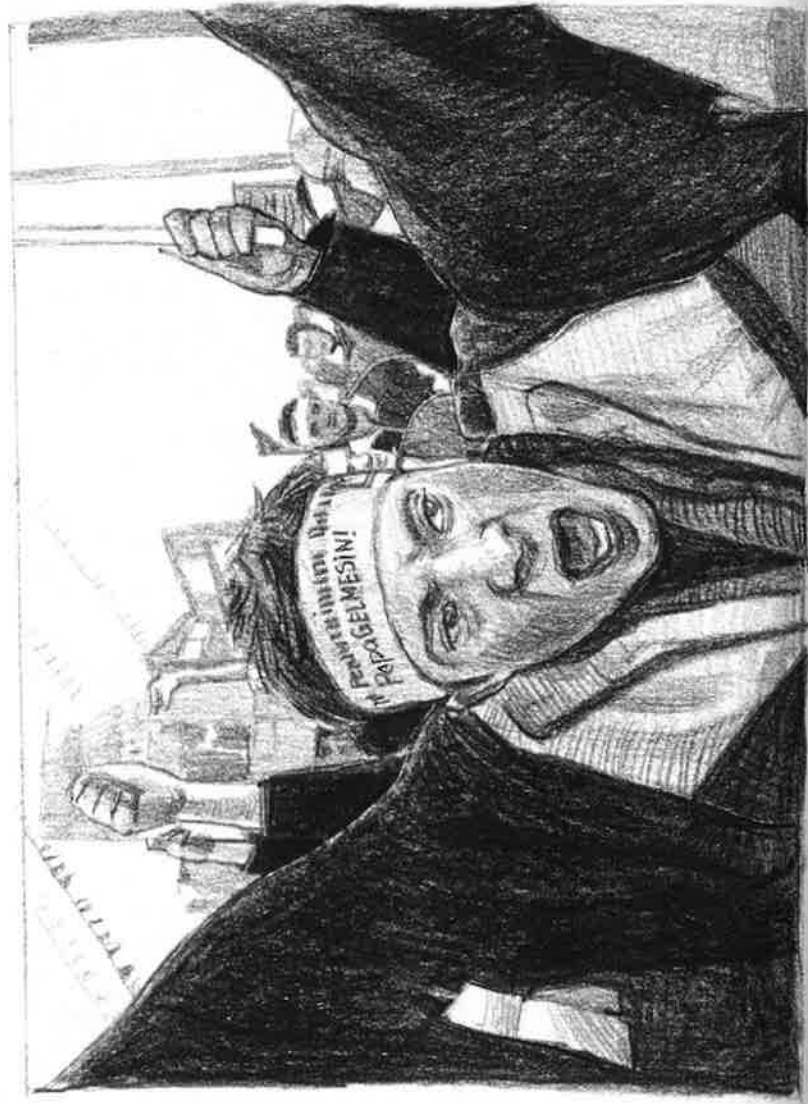


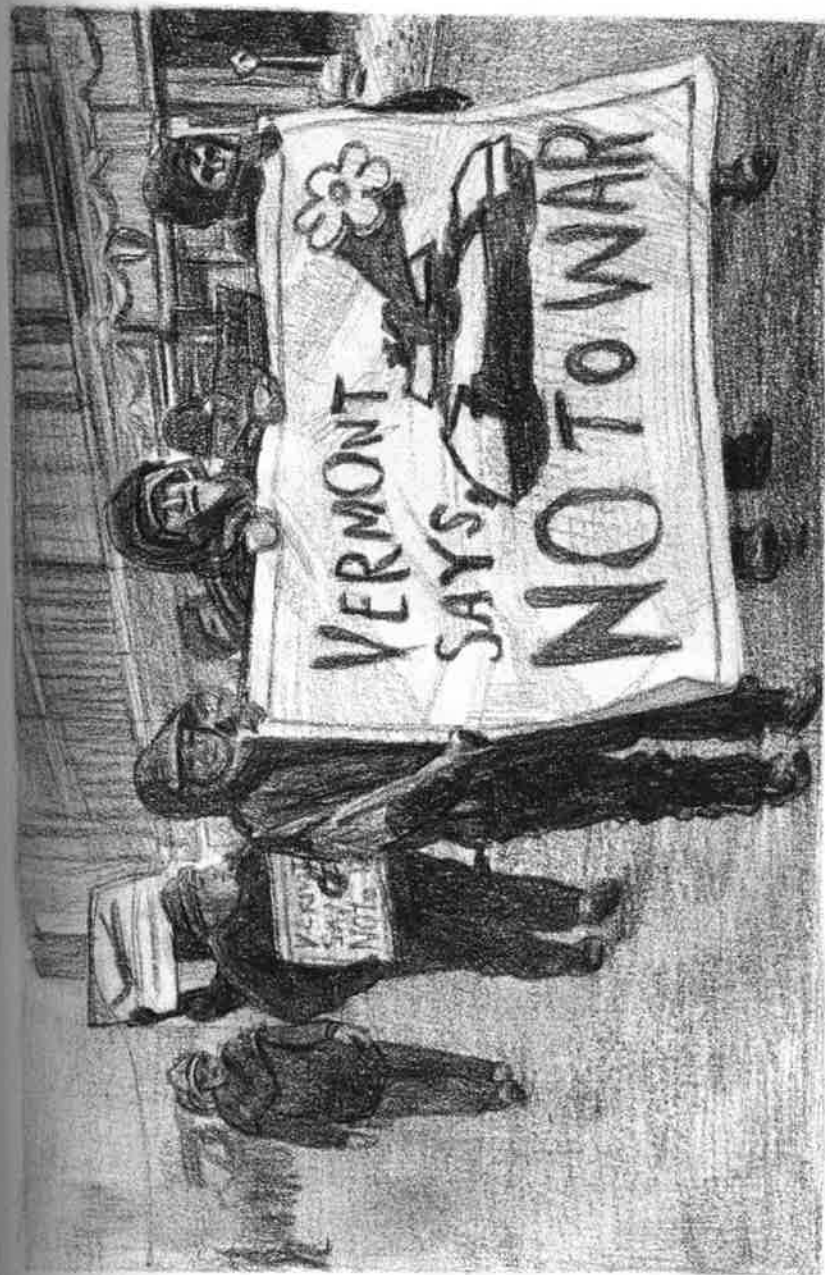


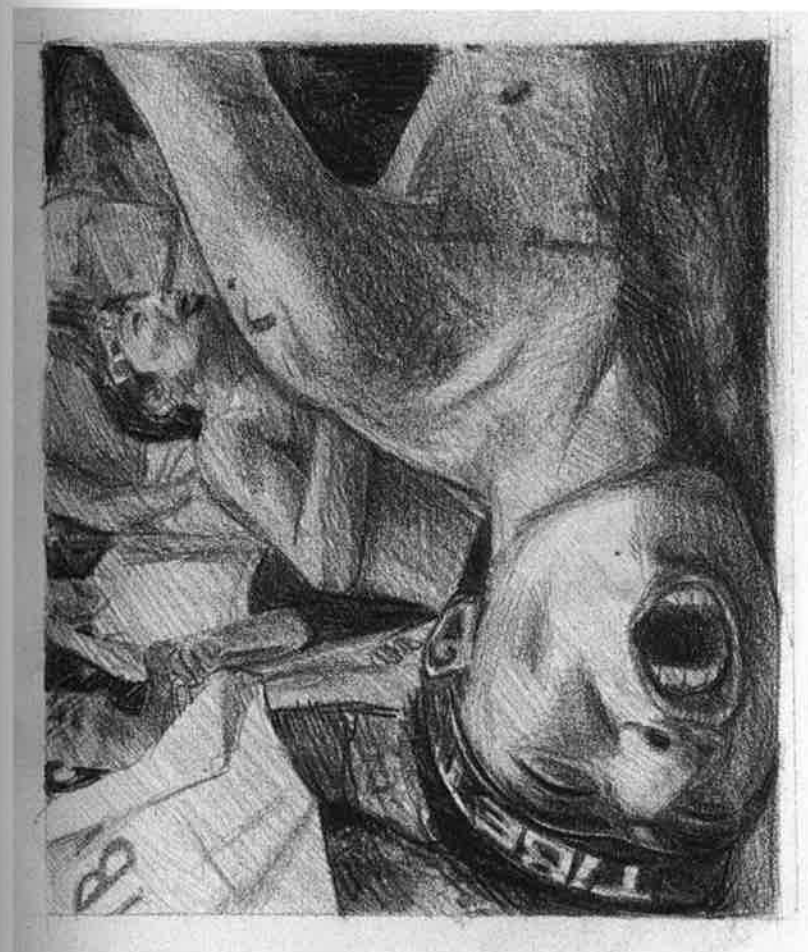


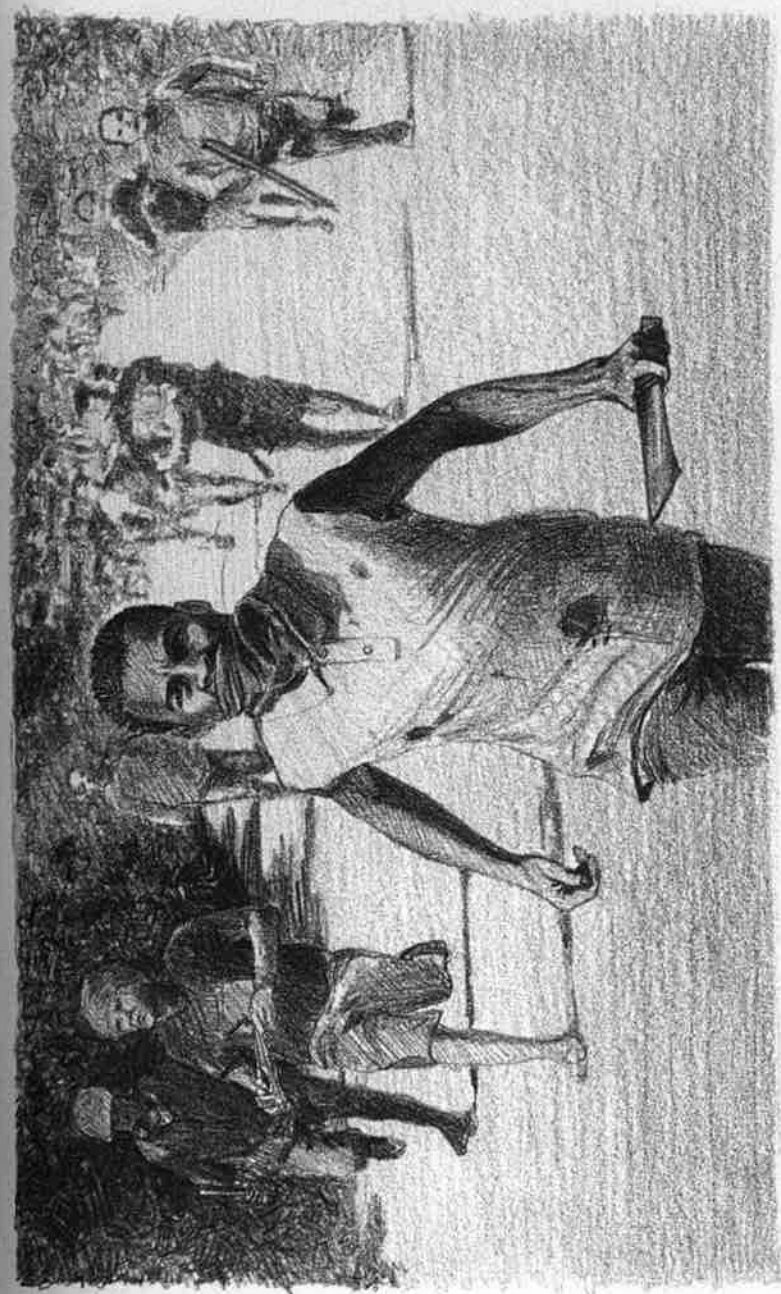


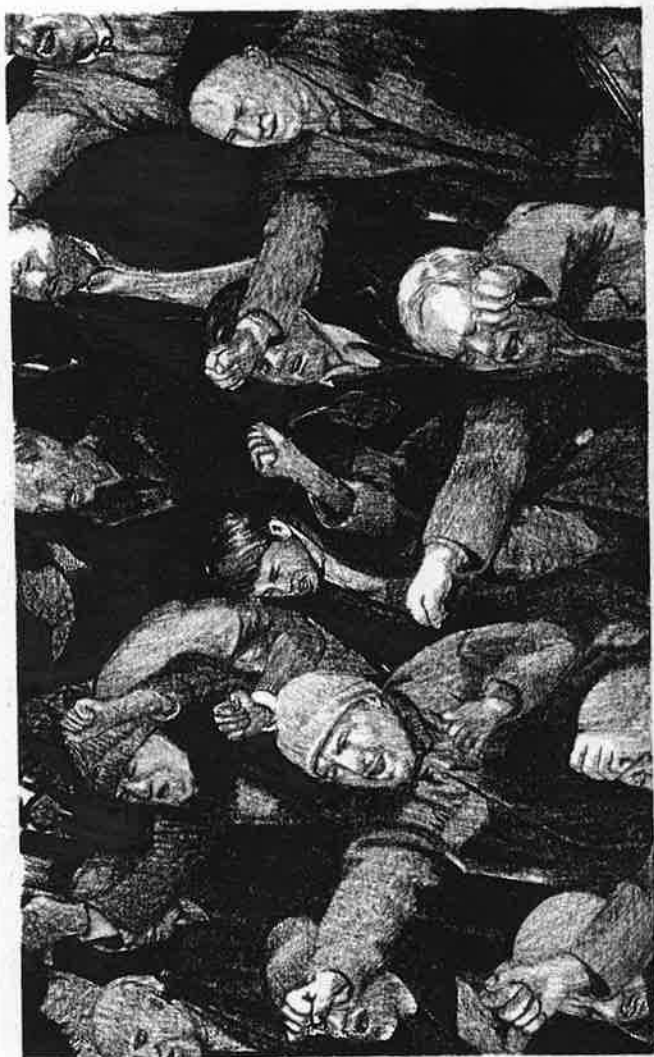










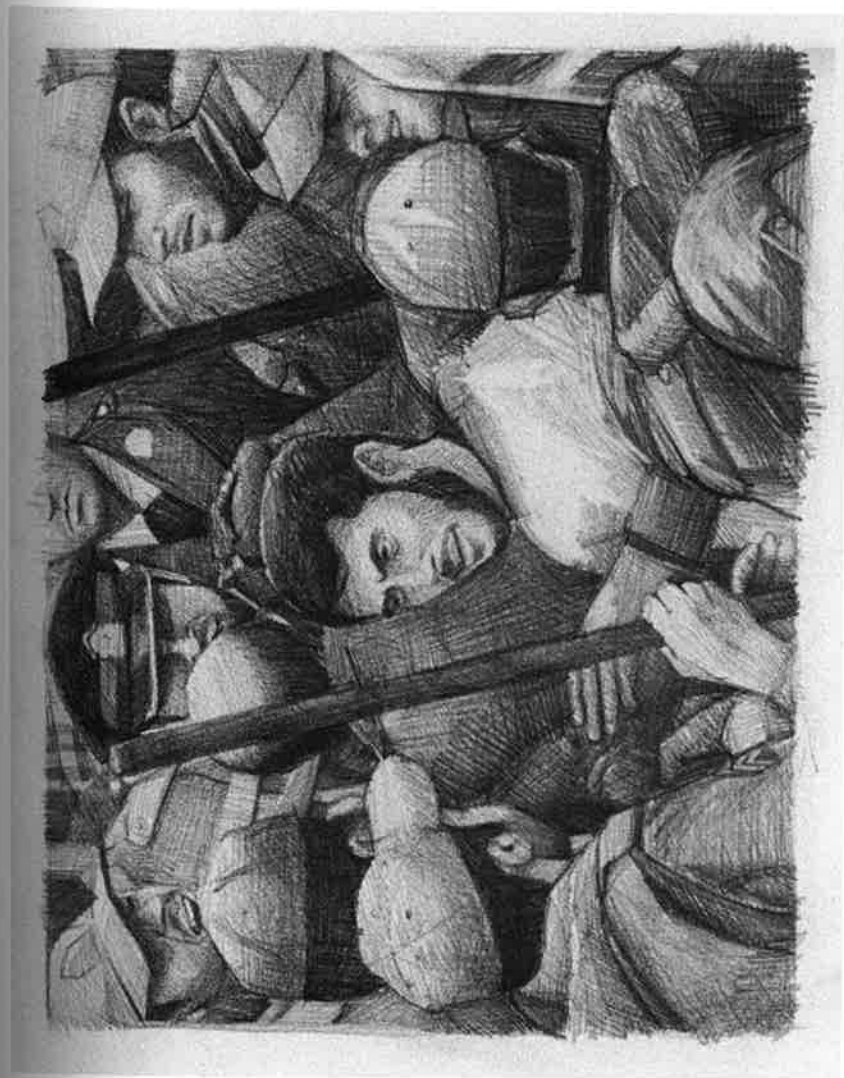






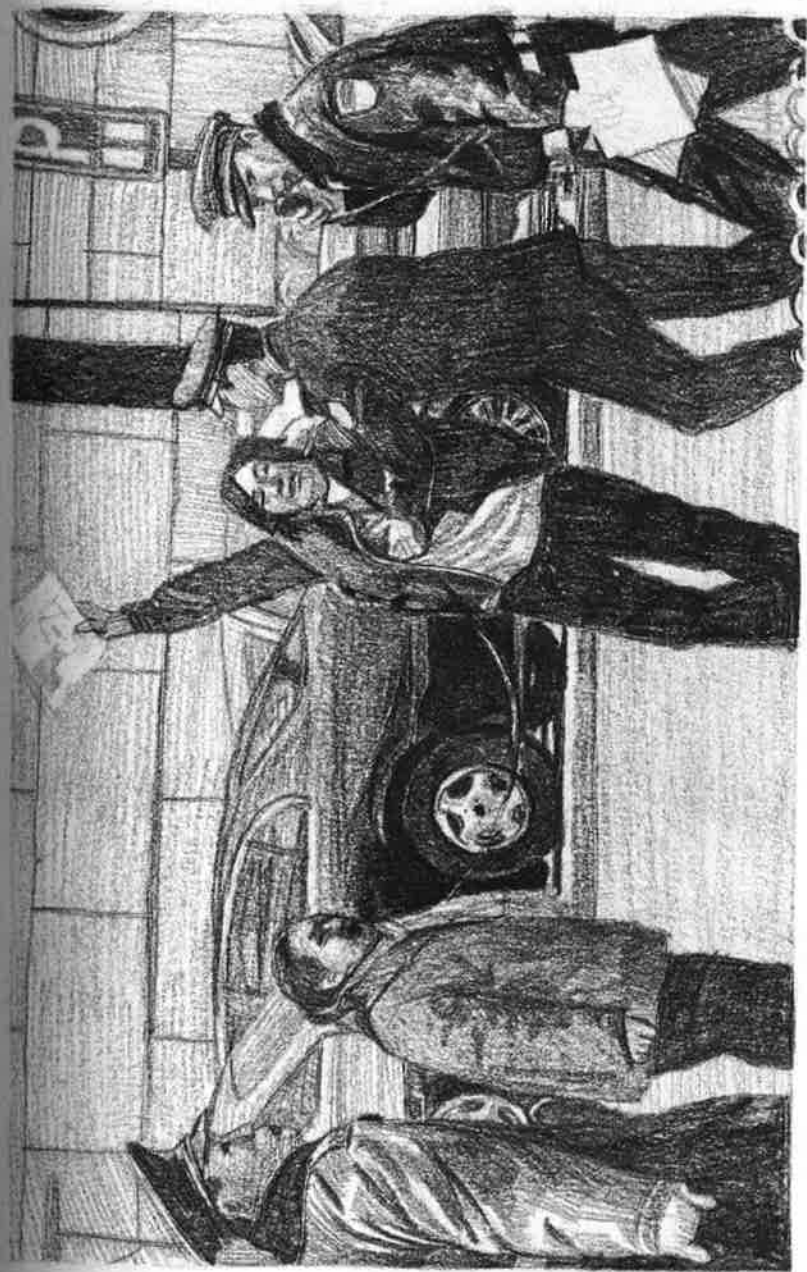




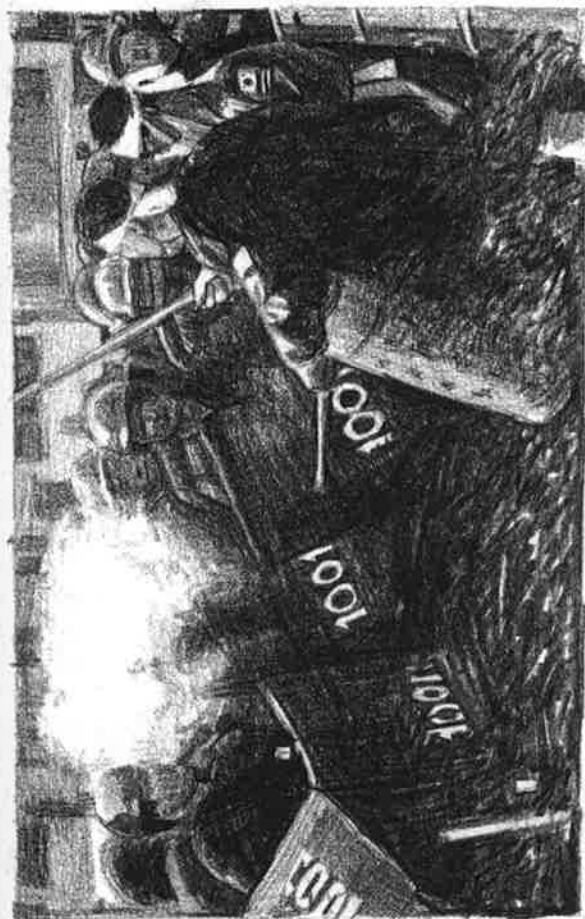


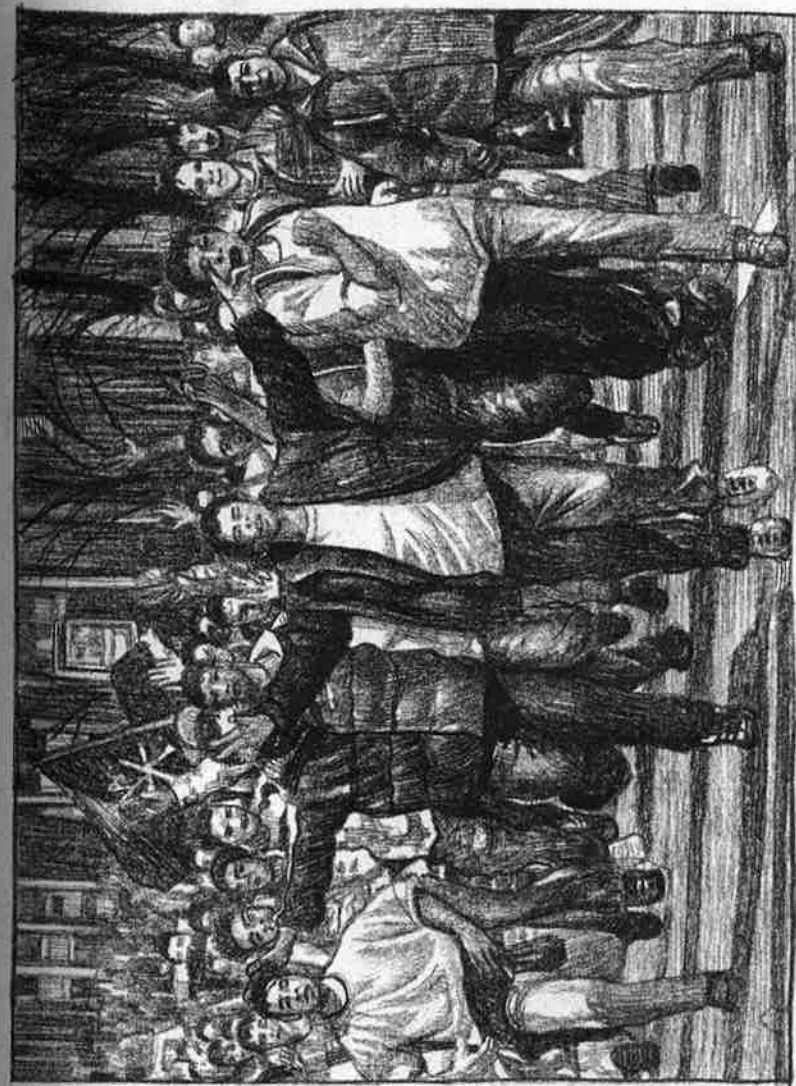


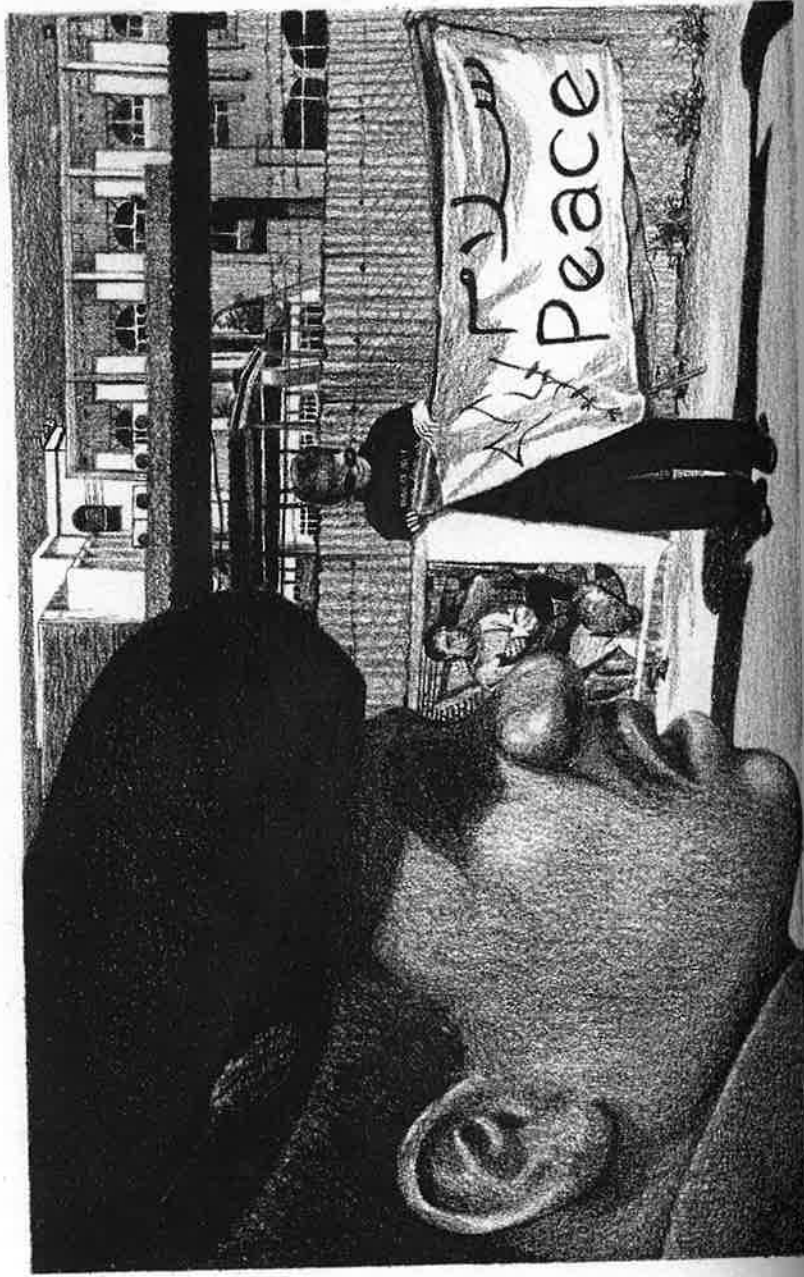
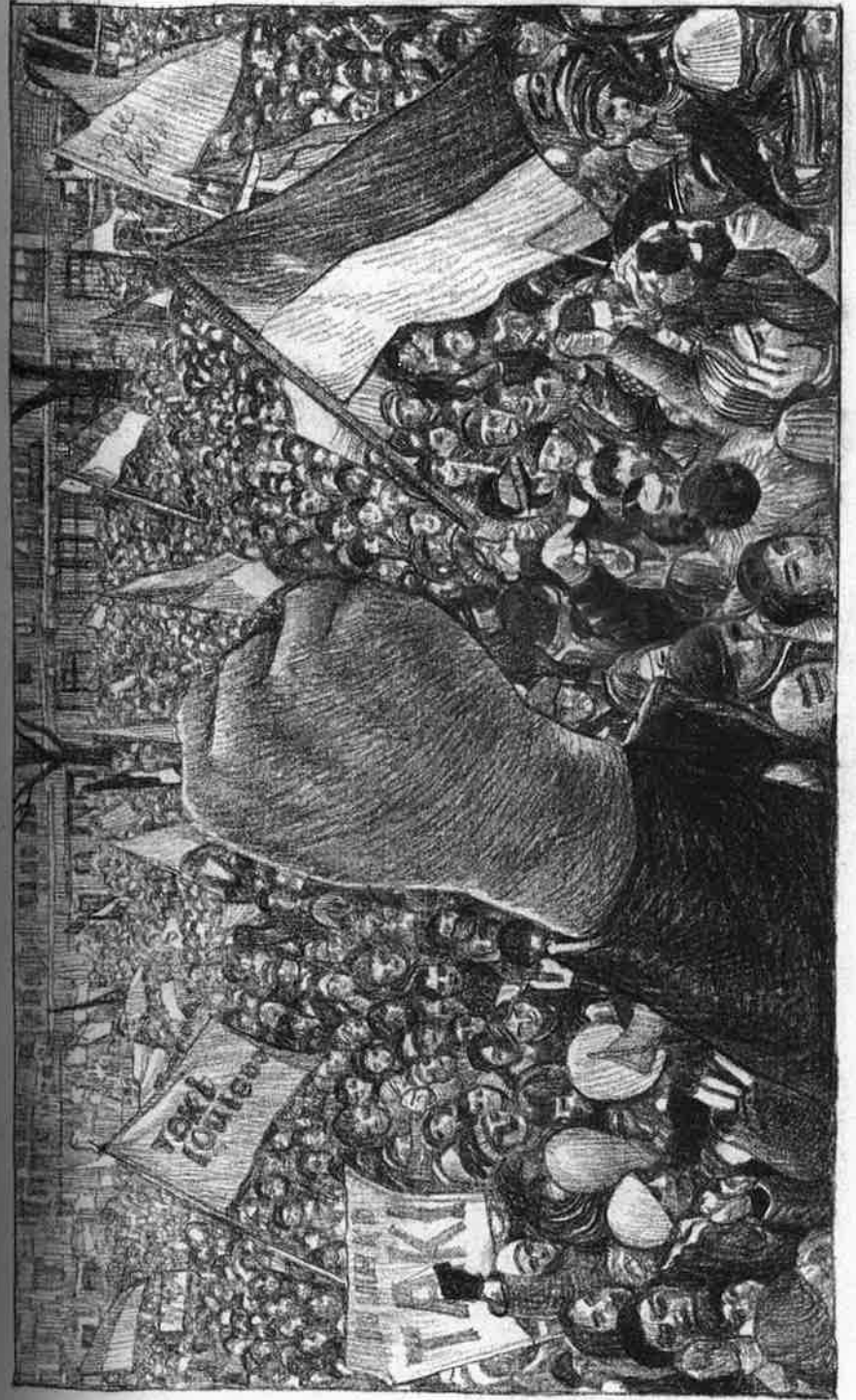


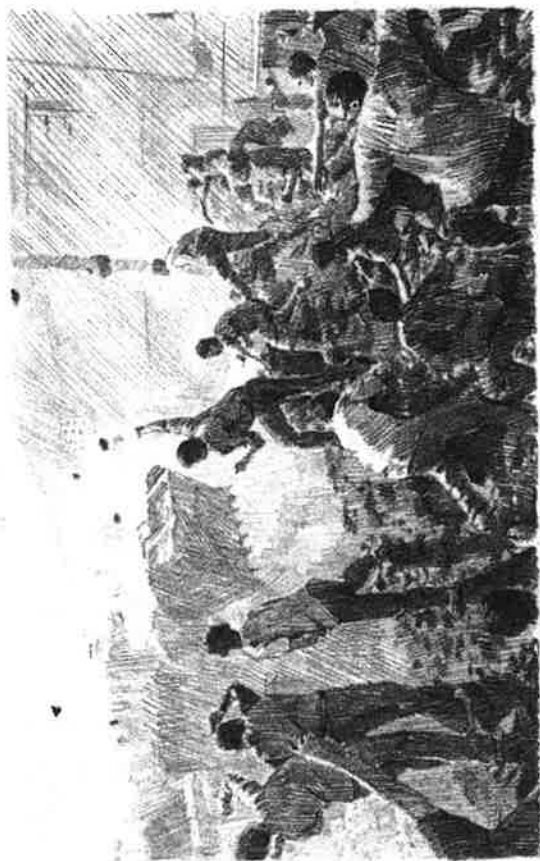


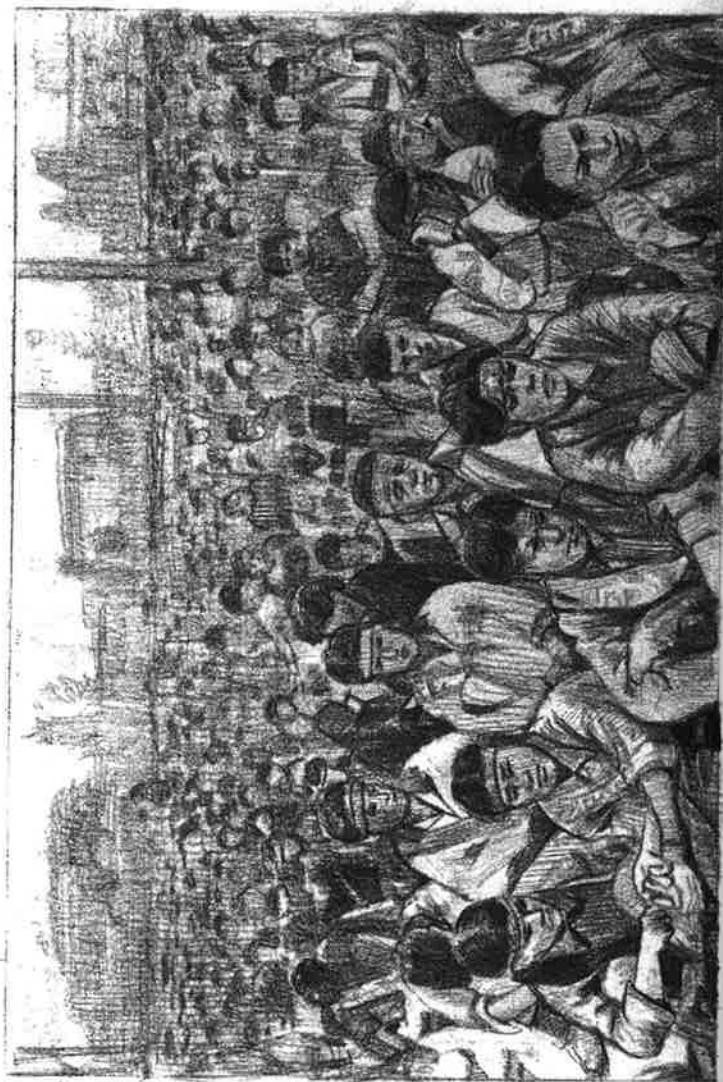


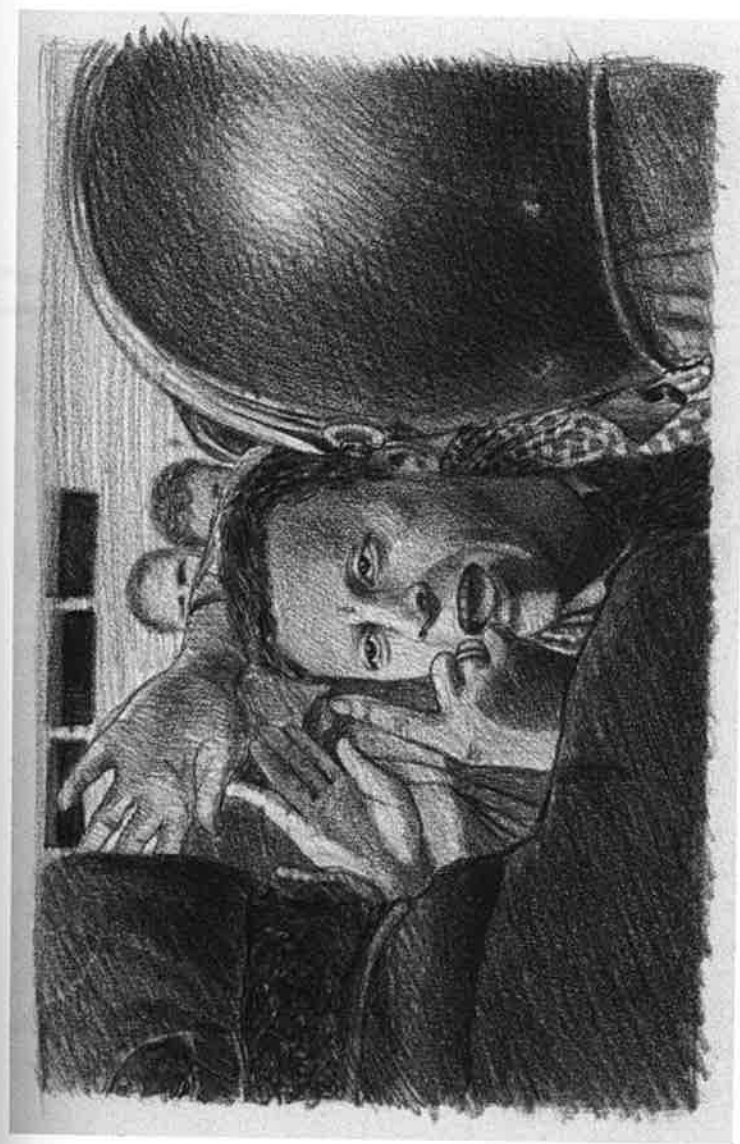


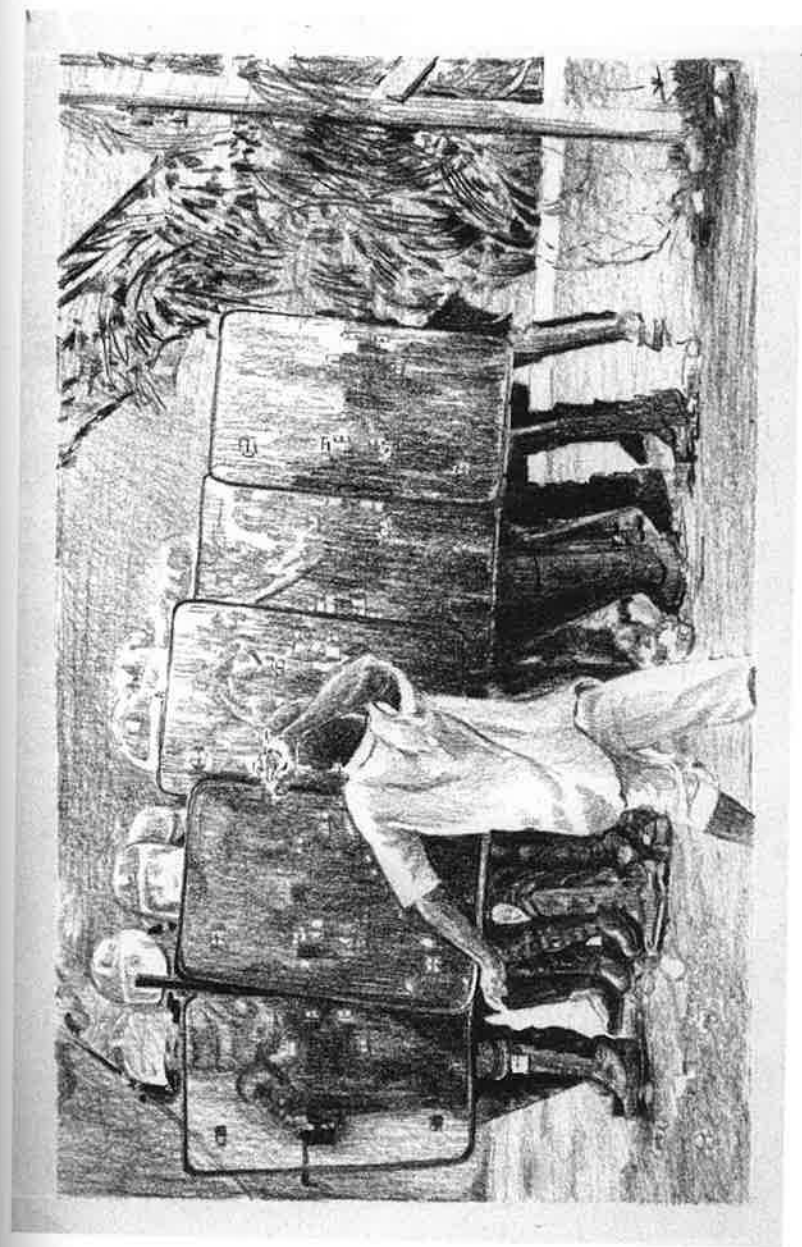


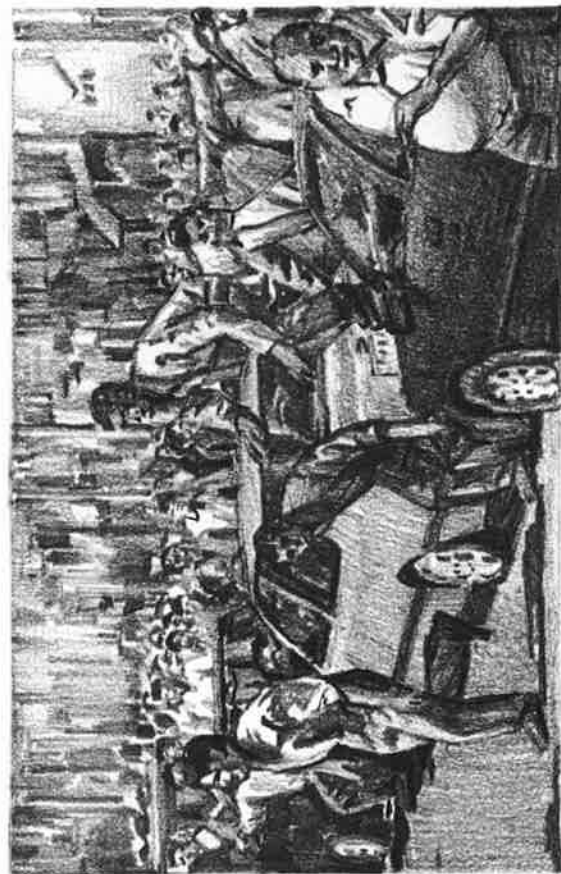


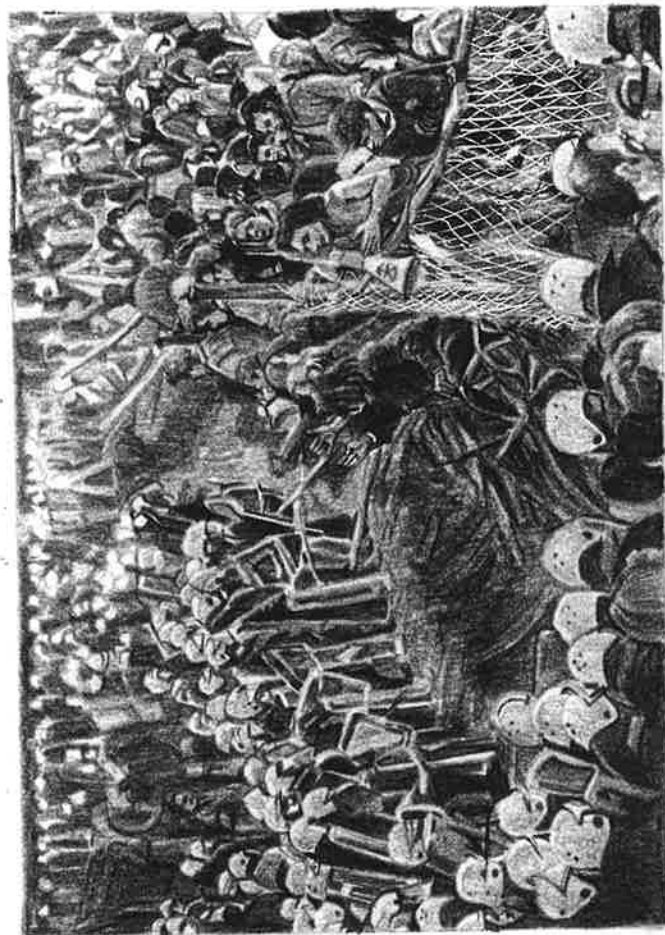


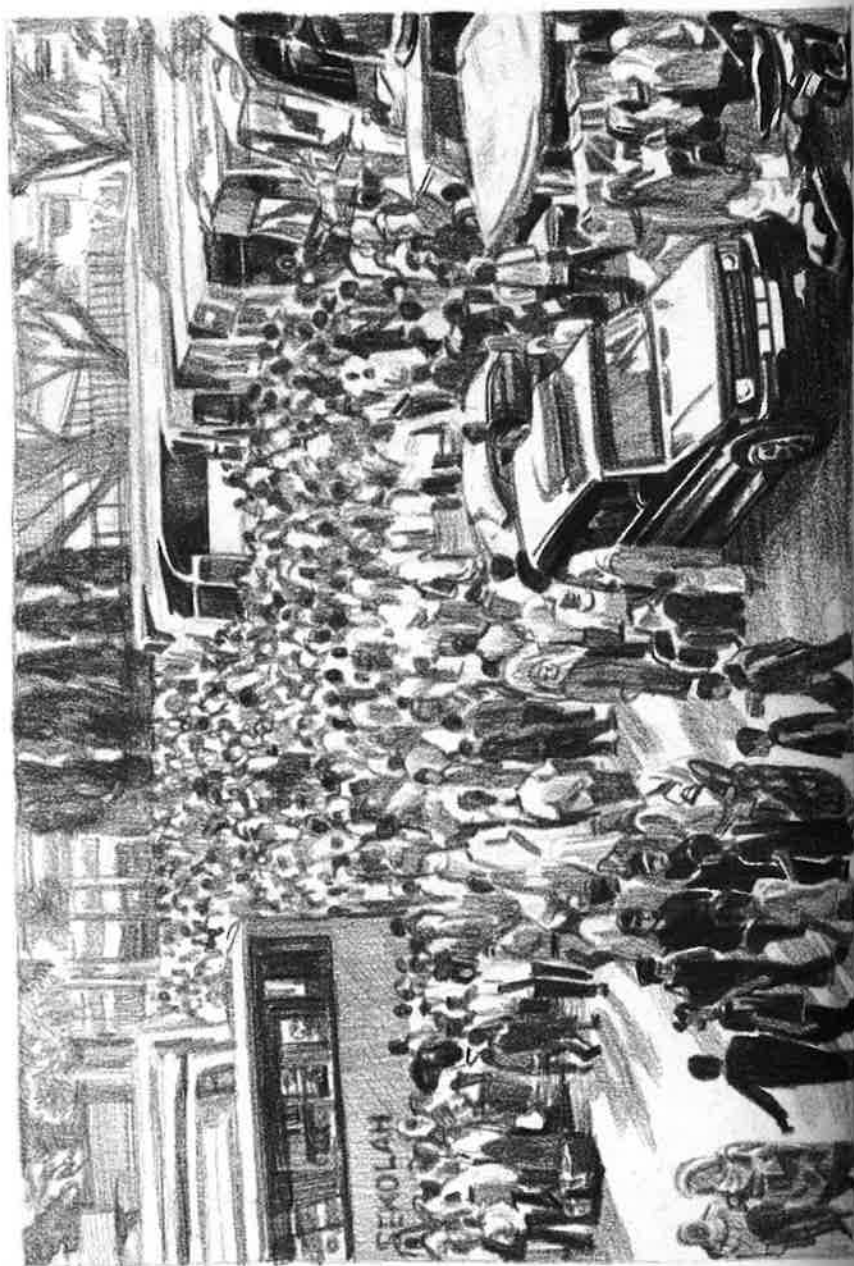


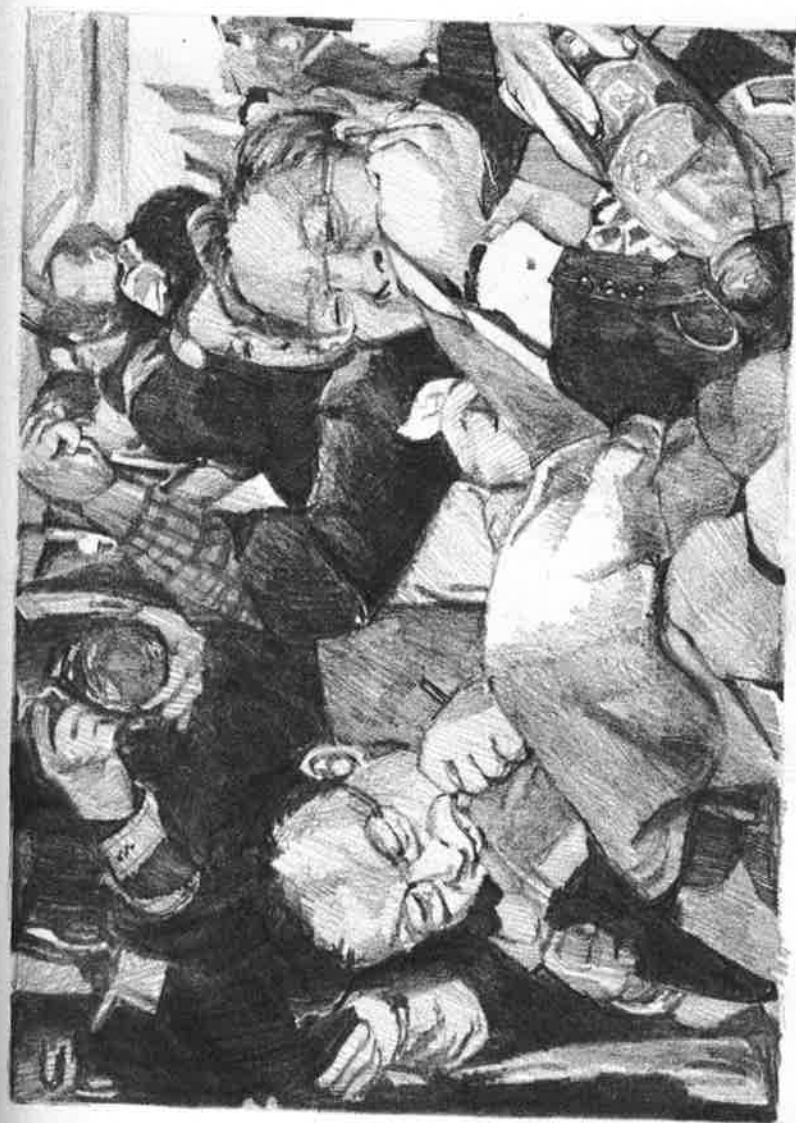


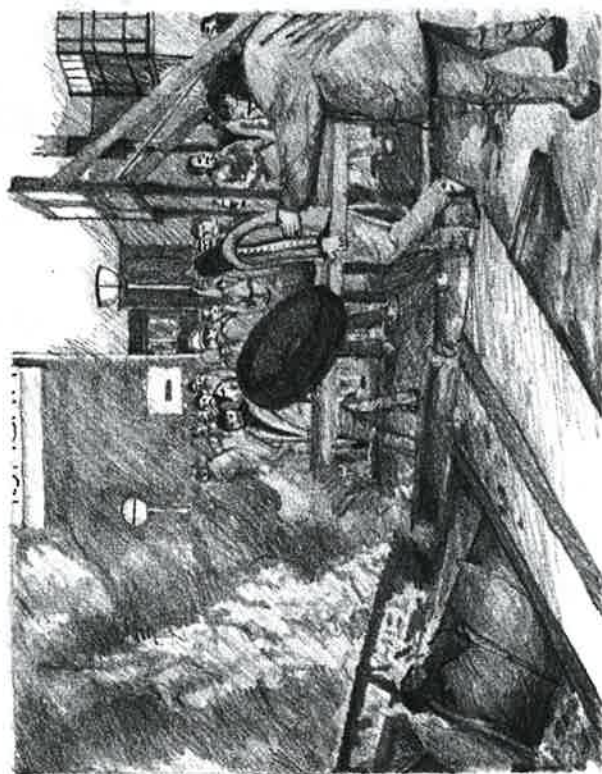


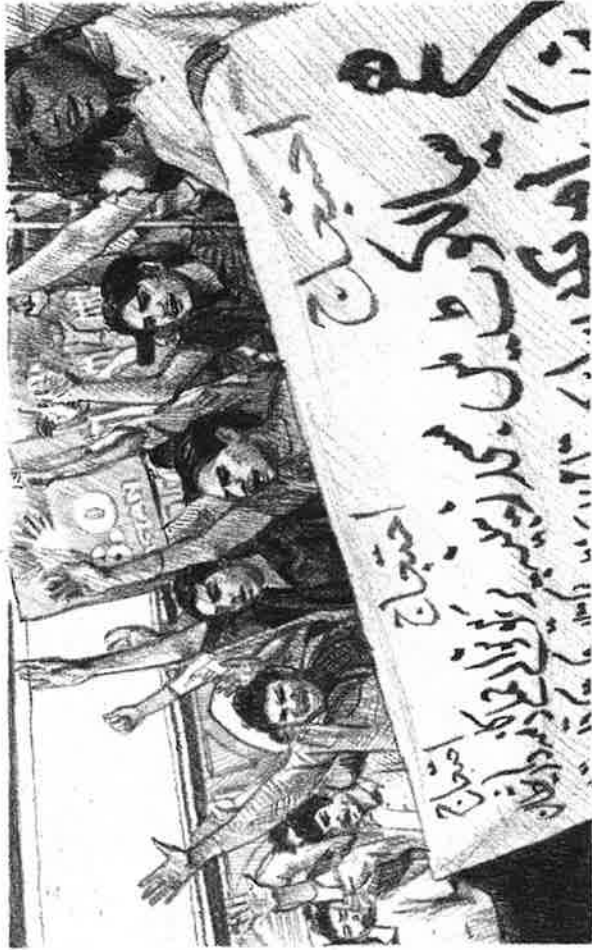
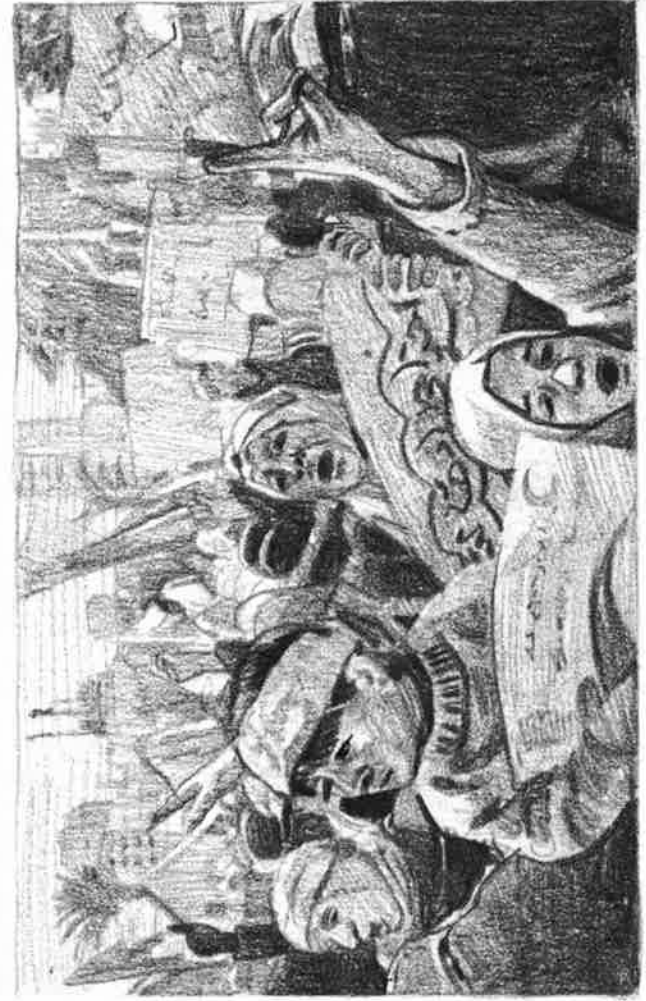


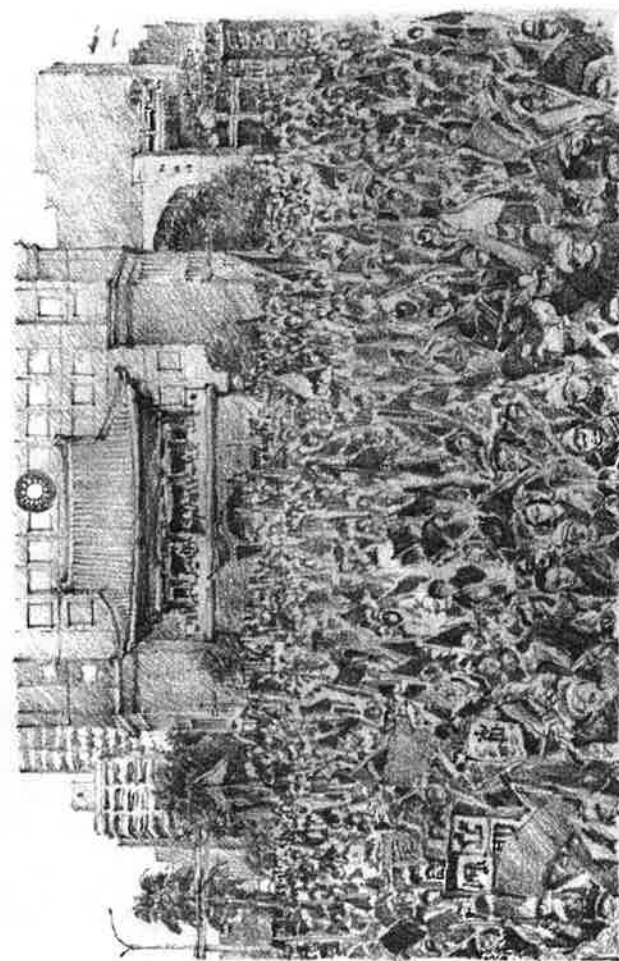
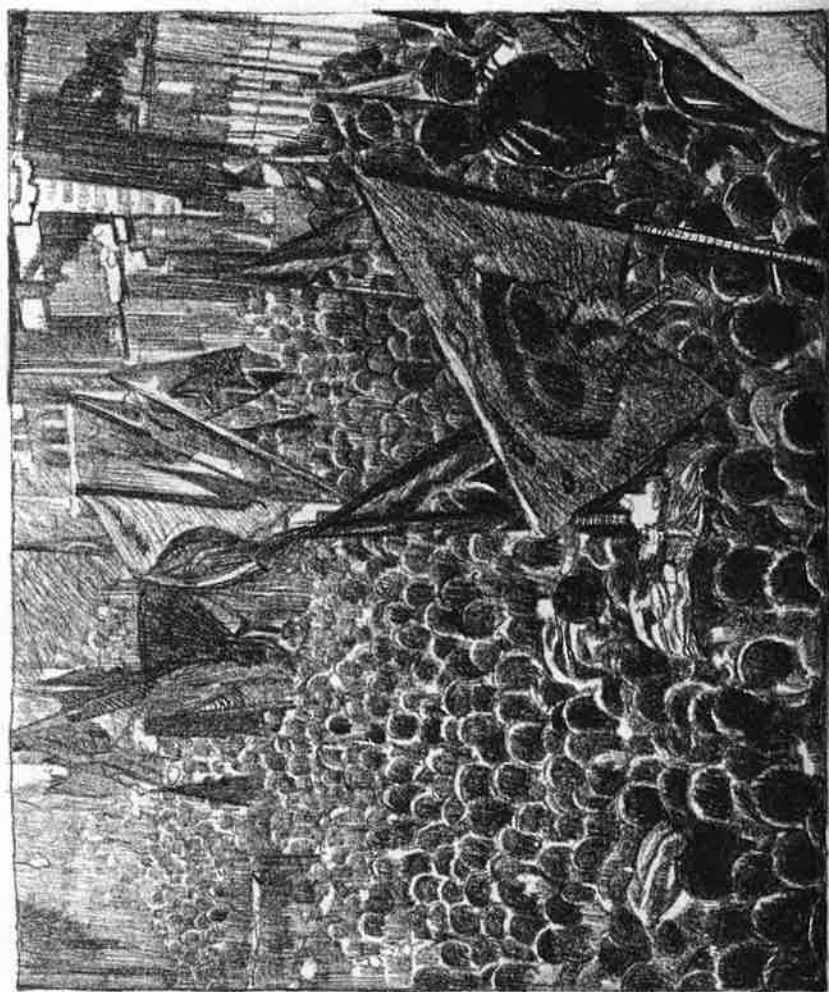




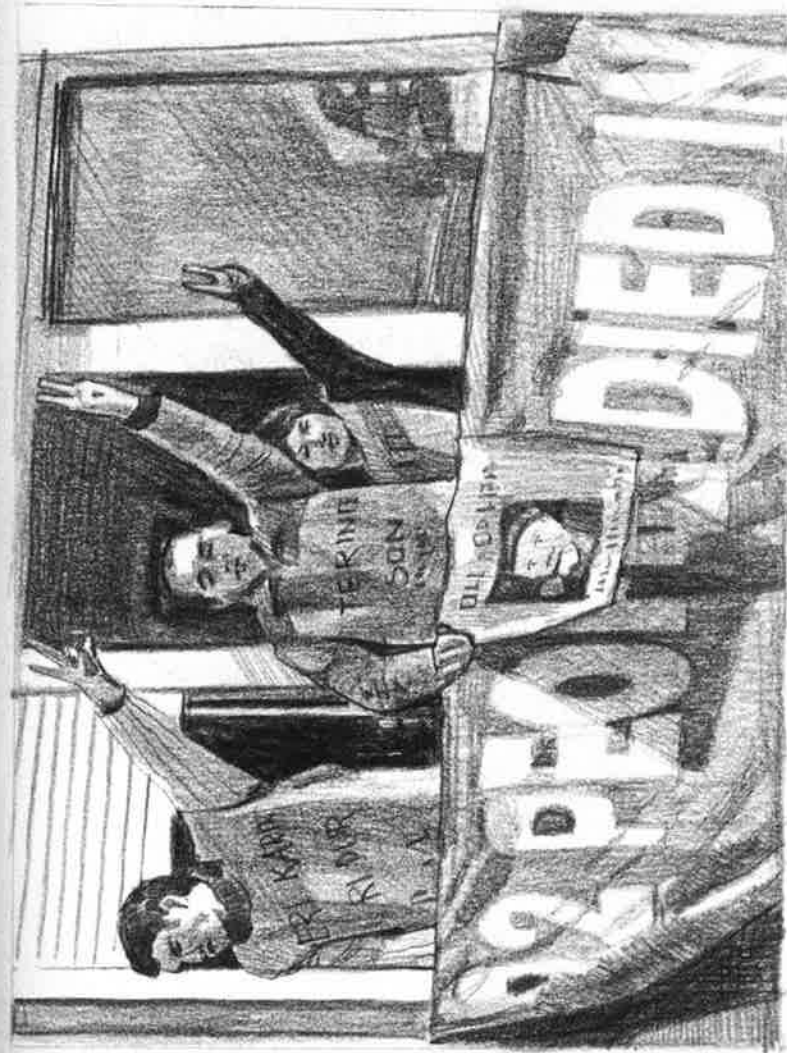


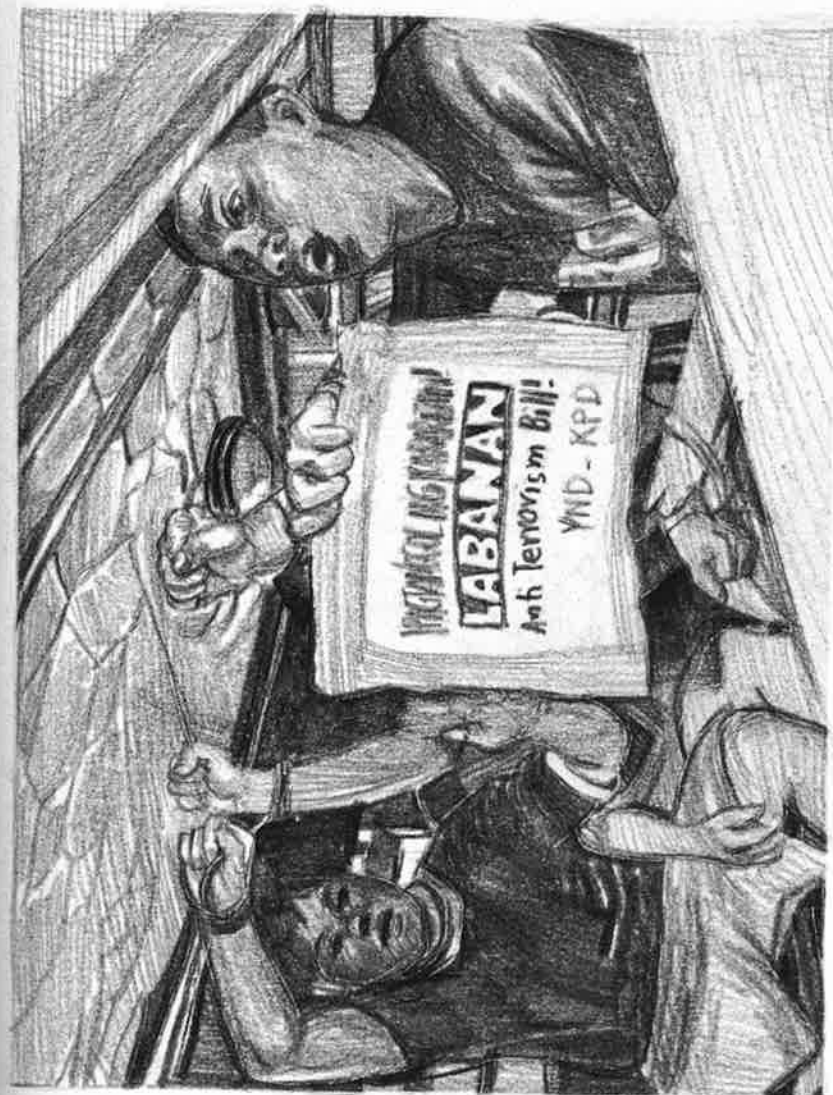


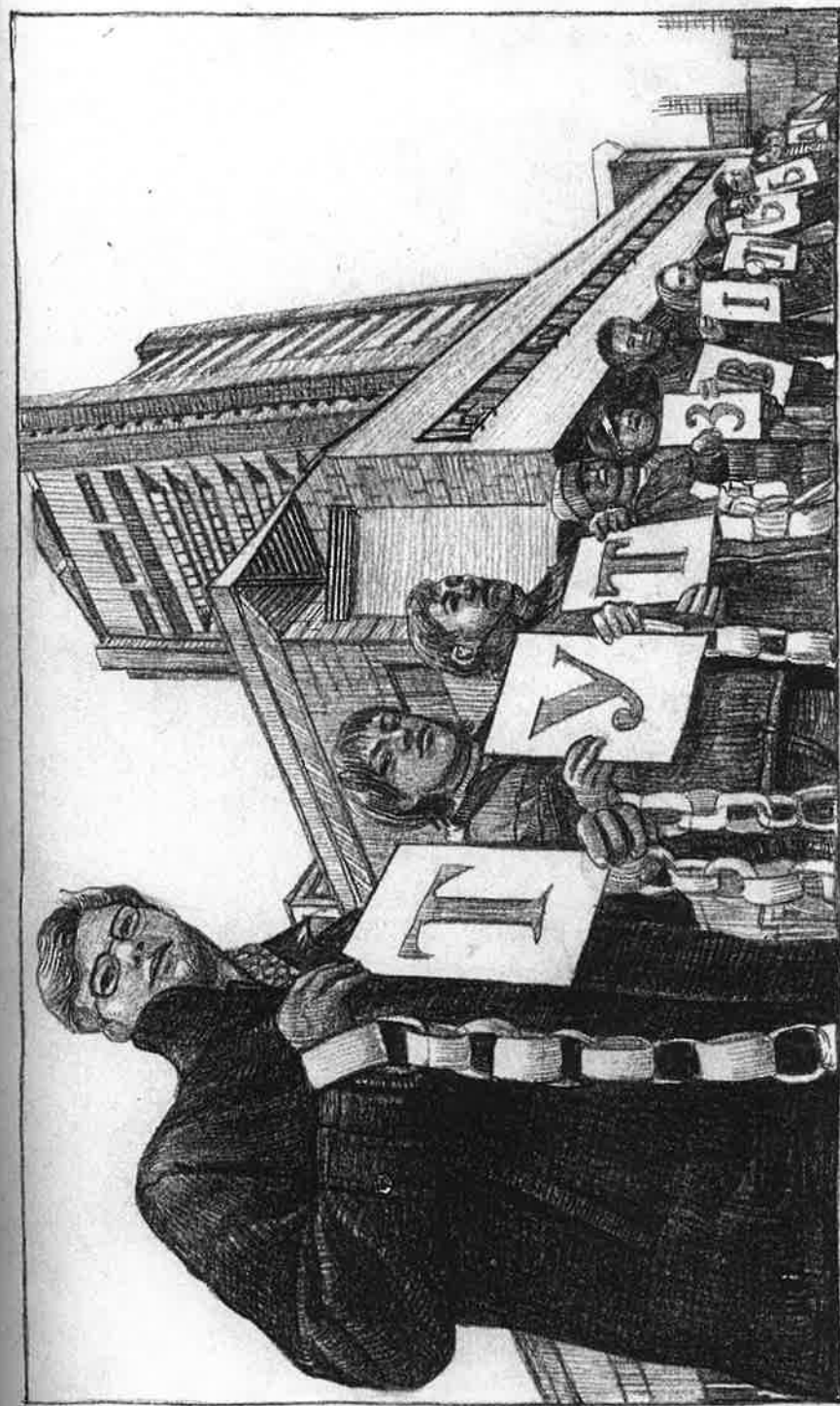
















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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Drawing Center's 2008–2009 exhibitions and public programs are made possible, in part, with the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation, Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, and with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a State agency.



Special thanks to Gavin Brown and Kelly Taylor at Gavin Brown's Enterprise; Amy Davila at 1301 PE; Maria Elisa Marchini at Neugerriemschneider; Craig Robins; Tony Huang; and Glorimarta Linares.

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João Ribas is curator at The Drawing Center.

David Rieff is a New York-based journalist and author. During the nineteen-nineties, he covered conflicts in Africa (Rwanda, Burundi, Congo, Liberia), the Balkans (Bosnia and Kosovo), and Central Asia. Now a contributing writer for the *New York Times Magazine*, he has written extensively about Iraq, and, more recently, about Latin America. He is the author of eight books, including *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West* and *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*. His memoir of his mother's final illness, *Swimming in a Sea of Death*, appeared in January. Rieff is currently working on a book about the global food crisis.

EDWARD HALLAM TUCK PUBLICATION PROGRAM

This is number 79 of the *Drawing Papers*, a series of publications documenting The Drawing Center's exhibitions and public programs and providing a forum for the study of drawing.

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Designed by Peter J. Ahlberg / AHL & COMPANY

Design Interns: Rachel Matts, Sabine Dowek

This book is set in Adobe Garamond Pro and Berthold Akzidenz Grotesk.
It was printed by BookMobile in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CONTROL NUMBER: 2008934852

ISBN 978-0-942324-25-9

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