Boring, Everyday Life in War Zones

A conversation with Jonathan Watkins

Azadeh Sarjoughian

The theme of the everyday has been widely explored and reflected on in contemporary art. The concept can still be seen as an inspiration for artists and curators, with its potential to unite art and life and to bring unnoticed aspects of life experiences to light. Giving some attention to the everyday draws the art world beyond itself, and stimulates a deep political sense even if this is not visible on the surface. In his *Critique of Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre points out the contradiction and ambiguity within the nature of everyday life as it becomes a site for meeting ‘illusion and truth, power and helplessness, [and] the intersection of the sector man controls and the sector he does not control’. Through his examination of everyday life, he extends Marx’s concept of alienation into all aspects that constitute social relations. The truth, Lefebvre states, is the awareness of alienation. He illustrates how art can reveal the truth while it offers a true observation of things that is external and from a reasonable distance, ‘an alien standpoint’.

The following conversation with Jonathan Watkins is an exploration of Watkins’ curatorial engagement with the concept of the everyday. Watkins is a British curator who has been the director of the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham in the UK since 1999. In 1998, he curated ‘Every Day’, the 11th Biennale of Sydney, in which he highlighted ‘the power of relatively simple gestures’ within the artistic observation of quotidian phenomena and marked the selected works in relation to ‘efficacy and unpreciousness’. There is no simple answer to the questions that arise in the investigation of daily life. As Lefebvre puts it, the everyday is a realm of contradictions; it is the intersection of repetition and creativity, familiarity and ambiguity. ‘The ambiguity and indeterminacy’ of the everyday are what Stephen Johnson recognises as the seductive aspect of the concept for contemporary artists, leading them to avoid approaching the everyday in ‘any straightforward documentary way’. Moreover, within curatorial practices, as Watkins explains, challenges emerge through the juxtaposition of alterities and commonalities of lived experiences as represented in such an international

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2 Ibid
exhibition, while, at the same time, there is also a concern to avoid a sense of exoticism in the presentation of non-Western artworks.\(^5\)

In 2013, Watkins curated the Iraq pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale. The exhibition was titled ‘Welcome to Iraq’ and showed the work of eleven Iraqi artists. The exhibition was supported and commissioned by the Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture, which is based in Iraq. ‘Welcome to Iraq’ offered the international audience a closer view of not only the everyday life of Iraqi people but also the life of artists in the country. There had been an Iraq pavilion at the previous Venice Biennale, in 2011, that had exhibited the work of six internationally-known, diasporic Iraqi artists, but ‘Welcome to Iraq’ focused on those artists who were living in the country and who were struggling with the lack of artistic infrastructure and support.\(^6\) In contrast to the political and social situation of Iraq over recent decades, Watkins created a sense of hospitality and comfort in an apartment at Ca’ Dandolo, the location for the exhibition. The apartment was furnished with sofas covered with colourful cushions and rugs, and in the kitchen black tea with homemade Iraqi cookies were served. This created an environment for the audience to stay as long as they wished, to lounge on the sofas, contemplate the artworks and explore Iraqi culture through a wide range of books and

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5 Watkins, Every Day, op cit

6 In the 54th Venice biennale in 2011, Iraq participated for the first time after thirty-five years; the exhibition, titled ‘Wounded Water’, showed works by Ali Assaf, Azad Nanakeli, Walid Siti, Adel Abidin, Ahmed Alsoudani and Halim Al Karim
photographs, some of which were borrowed from the Iraq National Library and Archives. This strategy was criticised by some reviewers who saw it as an unnecessary oriental setting, or for a lack of engagement with the political climate and the ongoing conflict in the country, but it was also admired by those who pointed out the powerful act of hospitality that places the relationship of artist/audience within the context of host/guest. Watkins’ decision to embrace the artists’ observation of the ordinary, of repetition, boredom and intimate relationships, and the struggle with traditions that people experience in their everyday life at a time of conflict and war, is in contrast to the dominant representation of Iraq in the mass media or in the international art world. ‘Welcome to Iraq’ inevitably led us to reflect on the historical relationship between portraying the everyday in contemporary art and equality, thereby gaining a deeper awareness of our expectations of what we are supposed to see in a national pavilion like the Iraq pavilion in Venice.

A consideration of the main theme of the 2013 Venice Biennale, ‘The Encyclopedic Palace’, elevates thinking about the positionality of the Iraqi artists in an international show designed from a perspective of a desire or dream of encapsulating a comprehensive knowledge of contemporary art. The Biennale’s curator that year, Massimiliano Gioni, chose the theme by a reference to Marino Aurit’s architectural model of The Encyclopedic Palace of the World. In the 1950s, Marino Aurit, an Italian-American artist, created his Encyclopedic Palace as a model for ‘a museum in which all worldly knowledge would be documented, preserved, and exhibited’. The structure of the biennale, Gioni stated, is similar to a ‘temporary museum that initiates an inquiry into the many ways in which images have been used to organize knowledge and shape our experience’. Gioni attempted to illustrate this impossible as well as monumental dream by bringing together ‘contemporary artworks with historical artifacts and found objects’. ‘The Encyclopedic Palace’ was an exhibition about the ongoing tension between the self and the universe, and about the impact of images and imaginations on our experience of the self and the Other. Accordingly, Gioni highlights the endeavour to undermine the distance between ‘professional artists and amateurs, outsiders and insiders’. In this context, diversity may not be an issue as it exists, but what is more essential to reflect on is equality. In her review of the ‘Welcome to Iraq’ exhibition, Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton points out the weak artistic value, in her view, of some of the artworks in the exhibition in comparison with the work of those internationally well-known artists of the

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8 Aurit’s dream has never been realised, but it became an inspiration for the 55th Venice biennale and attracted international attention. The work is in the permanent collection of the American Folk Art Museum in New York City. More information is available at: https://folkartmuseum.org/news/december-2012/

Venice Biennale who are able to ‘speak the language of resources and money’. In response to this point, Watkins asserts that ‘we are not so hung up on art and similarly value found objects and artifacts: The Iraq pavilion itself is an extraordinary found object’. However, the works on display in the Iraq pavilion were chosen with the good will of searching for invisible and unfamiliar works/artists, and it seems that the job was successfully accomplished. The question is whether curatorial and art-critical perspectives on the works fully integrate them into a broader discourse, and whether they could find their relationships with the past and present in a wider art-historical canon, on an international stage, and to what extent they could compete for a place in our long-term memories.

In his comments on the Iraq pavilion, Watkins has suggested that ‘a lot of the art is about making do and getting by: how to improvise in this difficult situation’. This expression recalls the quotidian as documented by Richard Wentworth in his ongoing photographic series, Making Do and Getting By, and suggests regarding the Iraq pavilion within the context in which artists start to observe the everyday with an obsession of making semi-diaryistic representation of their surrounding reality. Moreover, Watkins' comment highlights the role of chance in the process of producing art. However, for Iraqi artists the logic behind praising

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10 See Allthorpe-Guyton, 'The Aesthetic of Promise', op cit, p 140
11 See Fernand, 'Art and Minds', op cit
12 See Richard Wentworth, Making Do and Getting By, with an interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Koenig Books, 2016
chance is a matter of necessity regarding the choice of materials, media or artistic strategies. In an analysis of Wentworth’s work, Anna Dezeuze illustrates the trajectory of embracing the everyday through a photo-conceptual aesthetic that has developed since the mid-1960s among Euro-American artists, and indicates how the amateur photographic style practised in Wentworth’s *Making Do, Getting By* series enables the artist to ‘capture “mundane improvisation” in the everyday life’.\(^{13}\) If the sense of urgency, as Dezeuze points out, is revealed in a hasty photographic manner of Wentworth to join the ephemeral entity of the everyday, in ‘Welcome to Iraq’, it can be seen, for instance, in the WAMI collective’s sculptural installation made of recycled cardboard.\(^{14}\) Hashim Taeeh indicates his choice of cardboard as a symbol of poverty in the collective memory of Iraqi society during the Iraq–Iran war, when it became a ubiquitous material used not only ‘to cover broken windows, or on the floor as mattresses’ but also to produce art.\(^{15}\) This is what Dezeuze calls ‘a simple (more or less urgent) necessity to find a practical solution to a pressing problem’.\(^{16}\) A desire to find a solution is embodied in the curatorial process of ‘Welcome to Iraq’ as well as in the artworks themselves: in Cheeman Ismaeel’s paintings over domestic objects as a form of grieving for her loss, for example; in Hareth Alhomaam’s short film *Buzz*, in which the protagonist tries to find a place to have sex with his girlfriend; or in Akeel Khreel’s sculptures made from street trash and discarded objects to raise awareness about environmental issues.

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\(^{14}\) WAMI is an artistic partnership between two Basra-based artists, Yasseen Wami and Hashim Taeeh


\(^{16}\) Dezeuze, ‘Photography, Ways of Living, and Richard Wentworth’s *Making Do, Getting By*, op cit
The necessity of unifying art and life not only undermines the idea of originality but also the distinction between amateur and professional art. By describing the Iraq pavilion as a ‘found object’, Watkins positions his own curatorial practice in this context as well. His decision to go for unknown and marginalised artworks/artists, when according to him there is no cultural infrastructure in Iraq, was a brave decision. However, he oscillates between the celebration of ‘non-professional’ artists and showing their works within ‘found’ interiors, as opposed to a white cube, as if to suggest that they are somehow secondary.

The following is an edited transcript of a conversation that took place with Jonathan Watkins at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, in September 2019. It focuses mainly on his curatorial strategy in ‘Welcome to Iraq’ and his embracing of the representation of everyday life in Iraq while putting the image of the country as a war zone in the background.

Azadeh Sarjoughian Can you explain why you chose the title ‘Every Day’ for the 11th Biennale of Sydney, and what was the necessity of choosing this theme at that time?

Jonathan Watkins A biennial based on the concept of the everyday was unfamiliar at the time. You could see a manifestation of the proposition in Japan or somebody making reference to it in New York, but few people were making the connection internationally. The catalogue essay and the process of selection were a very useful way of organising my thoughts and organising the show. Basically, the exhibition happened when it was starting to occur to a number of people that ‘the everyday’ was a rich seam of curatorial possibilities. It was no coincidence that shortly afterwards I was invited to become part of a curatorial team for an exhibition called ‘Quotidiana’ (2000) at Castello di Rivoli in Turin.17 The exhibitions I curated at the Serpentine Gallery and Chisenhale Gallery in London, before the 1998 Sydney Biennale, do suggest a kind of pragmatism. My background is academic but I’m not interested in works that are overtly theoretical. I was keen on counteracting the discourse in visual art arising out of early postmodernism that was characterised by an obsession with mediation or obscurantism. It is what I talked about in the Biennale catalogue essay as a discernible ‘aspiration to directness’ in selected works, despite a wide range of styles, media and so on.

AS What role did geography play for you in the process of selection of artists? I ask this because of a lack of strong presence of Middle Eastern artists in that Biennale.

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17 ‘Quotidiana’ (5 February–21 May 2000) was curated by David Ross, Nicholas Serota, Ida Gianelli, Giorgio Verzotti and Jonathan Watkins.
JW There were Israeli artists, Guy Bar-Amotz and Noa Zait, and a Palestinian artist, Khalil Rabah, in the show and I felt very strongly about striking that geopolitical balance. Certainly, I wasn’t ranging around in North Africa or looking at Iraq, Iran, etc. I was also aware that there were no artists from South Asia, from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh. Obviously, I placed more emphasis on Southeast Asia, as you can see there are lots of artists from Thailand, Korea, Japan, China and Hong Kong. I was reflecting the geographic context. Likewise, therefore, there was a disproportionate number of Australian artists.

AS In ‘Welcome to Iraq’ in Venice in 2013 you also focused on the everyday life of Iraqi people and its representations in their art practices. I would like to make a connection between the two exhibitions by referring to what you illustrated in the Sydney catalogue. You describe the fundamental position of the exhibition, as something that is ‘more human than spiritual, more empiricist than idealistic, more philosophical than ideological’. And it seems that you practised a similar approach in the Iraq pavilion by displaying the idea of Iraq as a war zone in the background. The exhibition highlights the dignity of the everyday in Iraq, presenting a form of familiarity or commonality for the international audience in order to avoid the monolithic images of Iraq that always emphasise war and chaos.

JW And it was important to consider that there had been an Iraqi pavilion preceding mine that was like a reconstruction of a war-torn building with the emphasis definitely on conflict. So, I was positioning myself to some extent in relation to that.

AS I’m wondering if you had this plan before you travelled to Iraq.

JW Yes, I did. I had a very short time to organise everything. The Ruya Foundation approached me in December and needed the curator urgently to go to Iraq. I had worked in Palestine and in Sharjah and they knew that I was interested in the Middle East and that I was sympathetic, which I think encouraged them.

At the time, I was told that there were no good artists in Iraq, as they had all left and were living in the diaspora. That was a very easy thing to say, and it could also have rationalised the decision not to go. I could have had a more comfortable time in Dubai or Jordan meeting artists telling me about how far they feel from home, mixing received information with (a very understandable) nostalgia, but I didn’t want that. I wanted, rather, to meet somebody in Baghdad who was making a chair out of bicycle parts and divine something meaningful in that, instead of somebody hitting me over the head with their observations on conflict.

In the exhibition, the only artist who talked explicitly about the violence was the cartoonist Abdul Raheem Yassir, but he had an engagingly dark sense of humour about it. His daily job was to produce cartoons, making light of an awful situation – his were ‘true words spoken in jest’. Moreover, his cartoons obviated the need for any didactic interpretative material for the

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18 Watkins, Every Day, op cit
exhibition. They were very eloquent about the impact of the conflict – all those difficulties, the awful circumstances – on everyday life.

Abdul Raheem Yassir, Untitled, 2003, ink on paper, courtesy of the artist and the Ruya Foundation

**AS** To what extent did the ambiguity of the concept of the everyday help you to include a wide range of artworks?

**JW** For the Iraq pavilion, I wanted to place an emphasis on traditional crafts, such as rug making, as well as popular culture. Doing my best to avoid folkloricism, I wanted to encourage a consideration of different levels of cultural output that may not have been thought of as being ‘artistic’.

**AS** Why did you choose the title ‘Welcome to Iraq’?

**JW** Obviously it was very ironic, but it also made a strong, heartfelt reference to Arab hospitality. The word ‘Iraq’ in a title tends to conjure up images of checkpoints or ravaged landscapes. Visitors were sometimes very moved, possibly due to the understated awfulness. Rather than a dramatic insistence on the witnessing of terrible tragedy, it was more along the lines of ‘we are all just trying to be normal’. I think it was an optimistic proposition, reiterating the idea that where there is life there’s hope.

**AS** There were two films in the exhibition, *Buzz*, by Hareth Alhomaam, and *The Love of Butterflies* by Ali Samiaa, both of which remind us of a lack of attention to the notion of boredom within the discourse revolving around Middle Eastern art or arts from a war zone. In *Buzz*, Alhomaam subtly represents the existence of boredom in the everyday life of Iraqi...
people as embodied in their conversations and body gestures. In The Love of Butterflies, we can also see the experience of time and boredom in relation to gender practices in the way that the female protagonist experiences time wasting differently from her male counterpart. Moreover, these works can tell us how in an uncertain environment, individuals might even intentionally experience boredom as a form of disconnection from the future. It’s like living between fear and boredom. This is what I think is ignored in the reviews of the exhibition.

JW That’s absolutely right. I remember my father telling me about his time fighting in the Second World War. I asked what it was like and he said he was bored most of the time. But people forget this – especially now, due to the nature of news and current affairs. And this is why I didn’t want to dwell on diasporic points of view. Also, they tend to be fixated on questions of national identity and on what has happened to their country since they left, heightening emotions about what it is like to be there. But in Iraq then, children were still going to school, people were falling in love, watching TV, being bored, making films about everyday life ...

I was in Iraq a year before ISIS invaded Mosul, and it wasn’t safe. But then again it wasn’t as if everybody got up in the morning to go and fight with a gun and were lucky if they survived until the end of the day. Before I went there, I knew that was what I wanted to communicate, and that the awfulness, which affected everything, would be read between the lines.

AS One of the elements that shows the awfulness, and is portrayed in several of the artworks, was the presence of rubbish everywhere. For example, in Buz, while Fouad, the male protagonist, is hanging around in the Baghdad streets with his friends, we can see a feeling of
disinterest or separation between them and the ruined city full of rubbish everywhere. Another good example of this was in Abdul Rahim Yassir’s cartoons as well.

**JW** The rubbish was really interesting as a symbol of dysfunction, and that’s why it kept on cropping up. The piles of rubbish in the cartoons were even higher than the architecture, including the towers of the mosques!

![Image](https://example.com/image.jpg)

_Hareth Alhomaam, still from Buzz, 2012, courtesy of the artist and the Ruya Foundation_

**AS** Why did you decide not to transform the apartment in the Venice Biennale into a white cube and instead provide an environment for visitors to relax, to sit and listen to music whilst drinking Iraqi tea? You even showed two of the films on laptops. Was this comfort associated with creating a familiar and comfortable environment for the international audience, and in turn constructing a replication of themselves when they confront ‘the other’?

**JW** I wanted to defy expectations. I liked the idea that the most comfortable place in Venice would be a kind of an artistic embassy for Iraq. People used to organise meetings there, because they could sit and talk over free cups of tea. We had a kitchen in the middle of the show that also served Iraqi biscuits, and the recipe is in the catalogue! We showed the films Buzz and The Love of Butterflies on laptops, and I do admit that the artists were a little disappointed that their work wasn’t being screened in a more conventionally artistic way.

**AS** You showed Jamal Penjweny’s film Another Life on a large screen …

**JW** I did that because I knew Penjweny made the work for a different kind of audience. Buzz and The Love of Butterflies were the kinds of films you could watch on your phone and not miss...
much. Not cinematic extravaganzas, they were like episodes from a sentimental soap opera on TV. The idea of watching films on laptops in the exhibition also occurred to me because that’s how people watch films most of the time in Iraq. I don’t remember seeing a cinema there.

AS The juxtaposition of Cheeman Ismaeel’s and WAMI’s works (Yaseen Wami and Hashim Taeeh), while both series make a reference to household or domestic objects, dismantles the division of private/public spaces. It seems that both series offer a form of defunctionalisation of the objects, WAMI with their minimalistic strategy and Ismaeel by personalisation of the ready-made objects connected to her memories and life experiences. The artists put the materials and the objects in a wider communication landscape. Would you consider reading these artworks as a response to the binary of femininity and masculinity? How could you see these artworks within the history of feminism and art?

JW In the case of the artists from Basra, WAMI, who worked with recycled rubbish – cardboard, polystyrene packaging, etc – I don’t think there was an implicit maleness. But, then, I’m male … There was a bedroom in the apartment, and I cleared it out so that WAMI could put their works there. All of a sudden, it was a cardboard bedroom. Interestingly, the Venetian woman who was brought up in that bedroom came to see the exhibition and her response was very emotional …
The show overall was domestic – with or without gender politics. Cheeman Ismaeel certainly romanticised her relationship with her husband. I remember being with her at home in Sulaimaniyah and I saw the Clock on the kitchen wall and the heater, *Warmth of an Eternal Embrace*, nearby. These weren’t art objects for her and I think she was surprised that I chose them – objects that were carefully (very meaningfully) placed around her house like ornaments, without ever thinking that they would be included in an art exhibition. These works could be seen as resulting from a compulsive desire to decorate.

**AS** In *Our Little Screen* and *Memories of Prison*, Ismael covers a TV and a lunchbox with decorative patterns, but also with inscriptions that put the objects within a storytelling context, referring to her personal as well as social history.

**JW** Yes, the painting on the lunchbox was a kind of cartoon, telling a story about someone in her husband’s family who was imprisoned during Saddam’s regime.19 *Our Little Screen* was dedicated to the memory of her husband, as he was a filmmaker. He didn’t die because of a bomb or bullet but because of a medical condition, and the stopped time on *Clock* refers to the moment when he died. It was a gesture made as an expression of grief, not as an artwork.

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19 Cheeman Ismaeel describes her work, *Memories of Prison*, as a reference to her ‘husband’s childhood in the 1970s, when he would see his mother carry the box to a large detention centre in the city of Kirkuk, to visit his father, a political prisoner. At age nine, these trips stopped abruptly: his father had been executed*, see Ruya Foundation, *Kurdish Elegies: Cheeman Ismaeel*, 2013, https://ruyafoundation.org/en/2013/06/kurdish-elegies-cheeman-ismaeel/
AS What do you think about the impact of the economic situation on their artistic strategies and the aesthetic that these artists have chosen?

JW Art materials are not so easily obtained in a place like Iraq these days. In general, I’m more interested in people being creative without artistic materials. My exhibitions, I think, suggest that I’m not discriminating between paintings or found objects. Somebody making sculpture out of cardboard is as interesting to me as somebody making sculpture with bronze. There might be an economic impact on what might be identified as an art market, but that doesn’t concern me particularly. A greater availability of artistic materials wouldn’t have made a better exhibition in Venice. On the contrary, there, necessity was the mother of invention and that’s what really interests me.

AS The quotidian, and the idea of what is ordinary, can lose its common definition into a form of personal or individual understanding not only in a moment of crisis and chaos but also through practising censorship within a society with strict norms, standards and regulations. The imposition of a dominant narrative can lead individuals to practise their personal daily activities stealthily – as an example, the film, Buzz, represents the everyday life of a young Iraqi couple who struggle with the religious and tribal restrictions on intimate relationships between an unmarried couple in Iraq. The film shows the lack of communication between the young generation and the previous one, experiencing extraordinary isolation, boredom, depression and fear all at once. How did you see this fragmentation and the impact of the fates of these individuals on their artistic practices?

JW Probably in an existentialist way – that is a very strong thread that goes through everything I do. It can be heroic to experience the everyday in the circumstances you describe. An extreme case in point is the marking of days passing in a prison like Amna Suraka in Sulaimaniyah, where Saddam Hussein incarcerated Kurdish opponents – and the image of a wall in this ‘house of torture’ reproduced in our Iraq catalogue absolutely epitomises the boredom inherent in the human condition.20 When I referred to the everyday in Sydney, I was also talking about every day passing, carrying on in order to make sense of things personally, with the idea of remaining mentally free – which is the existentialist ideal.

AS Over the years of your directorship at the Ikon in Birmingham, many of those artists that you worked with at the biennales have had exhibitions in the gallery. How do you define the practice of diversification in an institution such as Ikon? And do you apply different strategies in designing public engagements with non-Western artworks or those art works that are sensitive to the phenomenon of exoticism?

20 For the image, see Ruya Foundation, Welcome to Iraq: The Pavilion of Iraq at the 55th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia, T Chalabi and J Watkins, eds, Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Culture in Iraq, Baghdad, p 88
JW  In terms of representing cultural diversity in our programme, certainly we acknowledge the local situation and people who are from elsewhere. About diversity – I’m here to present exhibitions and other projects that are international and relevant and as good as possible. I’m not here to develop a community programme like a mirror in which people can see themselves – simply to reflect the demographic of Birmingham, or England. I like the idea of people encountering differences and imagining what is it like to be someone else, avoiding any tendency to exoticism along the way. We do our best to achieve this through learning activities and public relations.

AS  Staying and working in one institution for twenty years gives you valuable knowledge about the audience’s interests and expectations in a city such as Birmingham. Obviously, your perception wasn’t formed just based on quantitative metrics, but rather by ongoing conversations with the community that is interested in art, for example through programmes such as the Ikon director’s tours. To what extent do your curatorial decisions rely on pushing the edges of the audiences’ expectations?

JW  It takes some time to bring your audiences around to a different kind of programming. We had a number of controversies early on – for example, arising from the minimalism of Ceal Floyer’s work or Nobuyoshi Araki’s eroticism in 2001, or A A Bronson’s large-scale photograph of someone who had just died because of AIDS in 2003. Concerning the latter, I did actually receive a bomb threat on a postcard that said: ‘I will bomb your evil Ikon tomorrow’. That kind of thing hasn’t happened recently – which is not to say it won’t happen again, but now I think it is less likely.

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