

# AFTERWORD GRID

My first welcome to Holland was an expression of gratitude for Americans in World War II: “If it weren’t for you, we would be speaking German now.” This was 46 years after the war. I was rooming with a family in Tilburg about 300 kilometers north of where my father fought in the Battle of the Bulge, the last desperate Nazi Blitzkrieg from Ardennes to Antwerp. “He lost a lot of men,” mom said; dad never talked to me about the war.

Robert’s father never spoke to him of the war. His parents lived their early years during what Robert calls “the very black page in history books of Amsterdam during the war”. Robert now lives in an area that would have continued to be a Jewish neighborhood were it not for the Holocaust. His son attended the same elementary school as Anne Frank.

I attribute some of the emotional distance between my father and me to the trauma he likely had when coming home to the States. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was not a topic at that time. Robert said, “My dad never saw things your dad could not avoid”.

Robert was born on May 5, Liberation Day for World War II, but during the Vietnam War. Based on *GRID*, the formative war for Robert is WWII; mine is especially the Vietnam War that I resisted by becoming an art teacher. Wars have affected us all but different wars leave different scars.

When I look at any artwork and want to gain some understanding of it and appreciation for it, I ask myself basic questions: What do I see? What do I notice? (Later, what do I remember of it?) Most importantly to me, what is it about or what does it mean or express? Does it say anything to me personally?

When pondering *GRID* I am aware that mine is an outsider’s view written from the security of a country that has been spared a world war on its own land. I see things that are distinctly Dutch, such as traditional clothing, Delft blue porcelain, potted flowers in laced windows, and flags and pennants of red, white, and blue but not the red, white, and blue of the stars and stripes that are customary for me. Robert omits tulips, wooden shoes, and windmills.

Robert adds intrigue to what he shows us by obscuring it with walls of brick, window blinds, lace curtains, a smoke screen, theatre curtains, a cobweb, Spanish moss, plastic barriers, and layers of images atop images. He conceals people’s faces by shadows, hats, a bag and goggles. Violence haunts *GRID*: it depicts torture and beheading during the Reformation; looting, arson, and brutal executions during the Eighty Years’ War and the Thirty Years’ War; World War I; the five year Nazi occupation of Holland; Nazis controlling Poland in 1943; grim workers casually taking a break in a concentration camp; a Belgian child molester and murderer in 1996; a political murder in Hilversum in 2002; and the bombed cities of Dresden, Aleppo, and Mogadishu.

Violence threatens throughout *GRID*: there is a three-masted colonial ship in 17th century Holland, the Olympic Stadium in Berlin in 1936, officers in uniforms standing among naked women, a hunter with a rifle, framed photographs of military officers with deleted faces, a Red Cross

nurse, bandaged fingers, a dog biting a man’s leg, cheetas too close to a semi-clothed woman, a skeleton, a pistol pointed in a living room, a kick-in-the-pants cartoon, a boxer throwing punches, a body splayed over the hood of a car, severed human legs, and a rooster whose beak is shorn leaving it with a face that looks like a vagina.

*GRID* is lens-based, utilizing images first captured by cameras, and thus persuasively grounded in real, historical, physical reality: recorded by optical machines that reify, reveal, distort, magnify, minimize, and isolate. Robert tells us that *GRID* includes him, his brothers, wife, son, friends, and neighbors. It includes actual SS officers, not monster inventions of the artist. People who dwell in *GRID* have lived in Robert’s time and in your time.

When composing the narratives that he has depicted, Robert positions himself as a viewer of the work rather than its creator. Things happened, he saw them, he recorded them. He leaves us bemused and bewildered with what he has chosen to show and what it might mean. The artwork is menacing and Robert is unflinching, bravely showing us what has captured his gaze no matter how horrific to us or embarrassing to him. What Robert shows, he shows dispassionately, as a removed observer of random powerful events in life. *GRID* is an impartial, accepting, descriptive collection of data from the world without the artist interpreting the meaning or judging the value of what it shows. *GRID* is Robert acutely observing, pointing things out that are odd or perplexing, and leaving them as they are for us to see.

Grids are intellectual constructs for orderly containment of the unwieldy. They tend to tame what they hold, providing a reassuring if false sense of control. Robert’s GRID functions differently: its discrete squares enclose troubling actions that become more raucous when multiplied and caged in direct proximity to one another and threaten to collapse the matrix from within.

A fit analogy to think about *GRID* may be Robert’s boyhood memory of himself in a school play. He is a cloud. He moves across a stage with a cardboard cutout that covers his face and limits his view. Wind more powerful than he moves him, providing intermittent glimpses of what lies below.

*GRID* is Robert’s selective summary of some inherited Dutch history and his lived experiences in the world. *GRID* invites us to look at what we find compelling in our own lives. It offers us opportunities to ponder what narratives we carry concerning the past, to be more aware of the present, and more caring about the future.

Were we to make them, I wonder what our grids would show. What are our juxtapositions of joy and sorrow? I wonder what we might include and exclude, and why. If we laid our grids next to Robert’s, more and different subject matter would likely add to its chaos but then some clarity might also emerge about a complex, difficult, transient world, and enlighten us about what being responsibly human could entail.

## Terry Barrett

*Art Critic and Emeritus Professor of Art and Art Education at the Ohio State University and University of North Texas*