



THE POWER OF OFFENSIVE IMAGES

Introduction

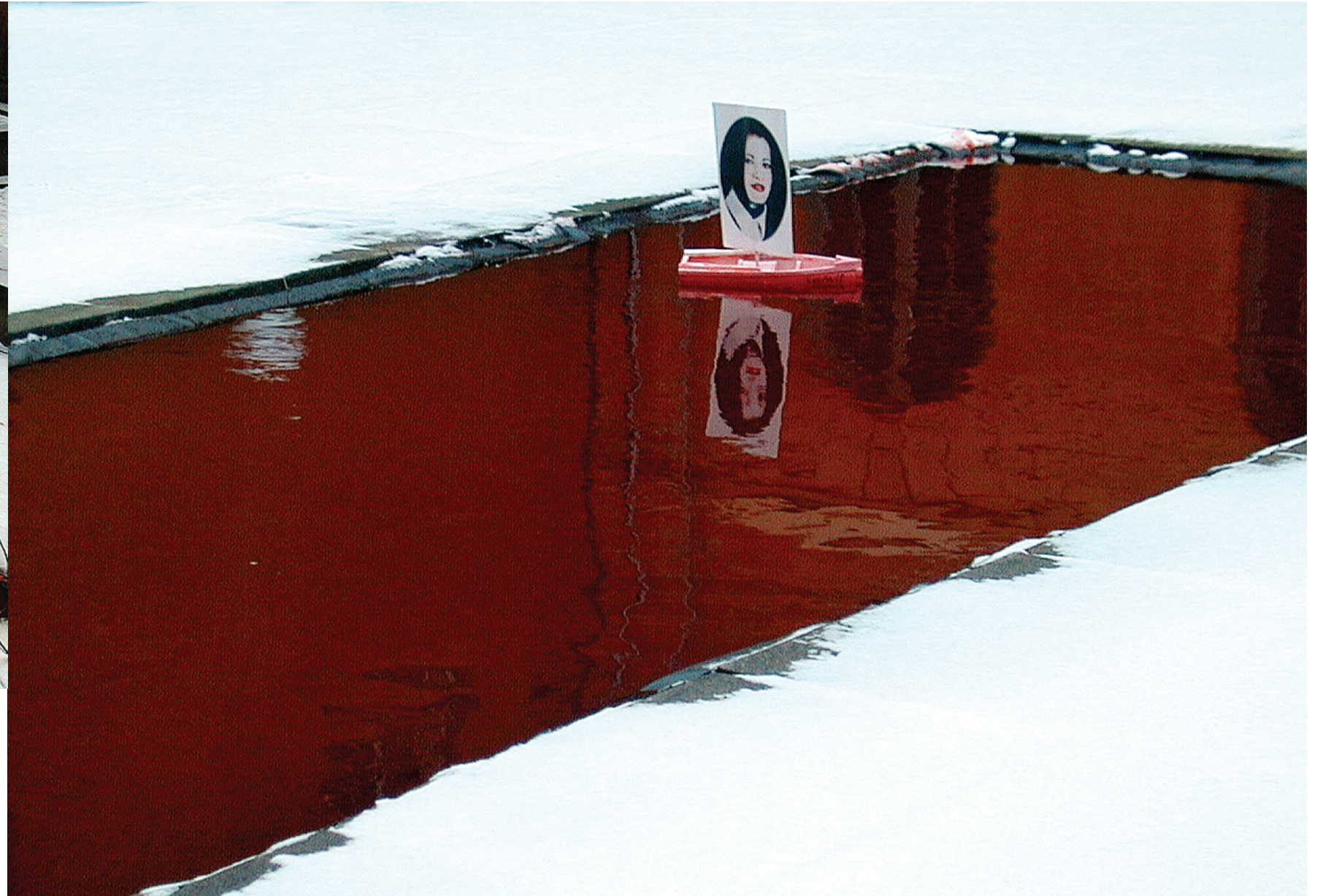
Once upon a time in Denmark, a children's book author named Kåre Bluitgen wanted to make a book about the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Bluitgen complained he couldn't find anyone to make illustrations for it, because artists believed depictions of the Prophet were blasphemous in Islam and they feared being attacked by religious extremists. Perhaps their apprehension was heightened by the murder of rebel filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in the liberal streets of Amsterdam after he made the film *Submission* in 2004. The ten minute film criticised the treatment of women in Islamic society and many Dutch Muslims considered it to be blasphemous. The Islamist militant Mohammed Bouyeri took *sharia* law into his own hands as he shot the filmmaker several times, then pinned a radical, apocalyptic manifesto to his dead body with a knife. carved with apocalyptic passages from the Quran.

With Van Gogh's murder fresh in the European consciousness, the politically conservative Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, ostensibly wished to show courage in the face of terror and help Bluitgen make his book on the Prophet Muhammad. The paper commissioned a number of cartoonists/caricaturists (not 'illustrators') to draw images of Muhammad as the artists saw him. A dozen of these were posted in the paper on 30 September 2005. Most were silly, hardly salient – a couple were so poor in quality and execution that the paper should have been downright embarrassed in retrospect for even printing them – while several of the images depicted nasty, aggressive, and violent depictions, such as Muhammad with a bomb for a turban and another of Muhammad clutching a sword and bearing an angry expression. What he was angry about was never indicated within the cartoon. Regardless, not much happened after the initial printing, save the protests of a few Muslim groups in Denmark. Soon after, on 17 October 2005, the independent Egyptian paper *Al Fagr* reprinted several of the images during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, including the sword-wielding Muhammad image on the newspaper cover. Again, not much was said.

Images gain seemingly immaterial energy, aura,
from raw materials, causing physical responses on the part
of viewers.



ABOVE:
Sarah Lucas, *Christ You Know It Ain't Easy*, 2006. Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam.



OPPOSITE:
Ciprian Muresan, *The End of the Five Years Plan*, 2006.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.