MAIN THEME: ON LANGUAGE AS VIOLENCE A PROJECT COMPOSED OF A FILM, AN URDU/ENGLISH LANGUAGE EXCHANGE, STREET INTERVENTIONS, A RADIO SHOW, PERFORMANCES, A NEWSPAPER, AND FINALLY, A MONTH-LONG FESTIVAL IN LONDON: THE MUSEUM OF NON PARTICIPATION IS THE LATEST ENDEAVOR OF ARTISTS/CURATORS KAREN MIRZA AND BERNARD JEEVARAJ. THE MUSEUM ORBITS THEMES SUCH AS THE ONE WE PICKED FOR THIS SECTION, ON LANGUAGE AS VIOLENCE, EXPLORED THROUGH AN INTERVIEW WITH EDIT MOLNÁR, AN ESSAY BY BRAD BUTLER, A SPECIAL PROJECT COMMISSIONED BY KALEIDOSCOPE, AND AN EXCERPT FROM A NOTEWORTHY LECTURE.
ABOUT THE TITLE

Why are Karen Mirza and Brad Butler questioning the concepts of participation, resistance, architecture and democracy by testing the limits of language? The conversation starts with what they once realized while looking out of a window of the National Art Gallery in Islamabad.

interview by EDIT MOLNÁR


Karen Mirza: It is a very important question, but the “non” in this sense is not conceived as being negative or as an inversion of the project. Rather, it is provocative, it playfully points to the fact that non-participation does not exist in our times, or that it is, in a way, a paradox. The title is proposing a possible impossibility.

Brad Butler: We often tell a story that has now become kind of a metaphor for the project. We were standing in the National Art Gallery in Islamabad in the most contested gallery where the nude paintings are displayed…

KM: … these were basically works about the body in art, the representation of the body, which included pieces not just about gender but also about homosexuality. Each room from the collection was curated by another art historian or critic.

BB: But when we walked around in this particular room, we looked out the window and saw the lawyers protesting outside the Pakistani High Commission. So we stood within the museum looking through the window onto this gathering mass of lawyers. The protest became violent, so we ended up watching the police beat up all these lawyers who were protesting…

KM: … policemen beating up men in black suits, white shirts and black ties. Men with neat haircuts, outside the supreme court, which is an extremely modern piece of architecture. The lawyers protest was really interesting, as it was one of the largest civil non-violent protests in the history of Pakistan. Pakistan was born out of violence, the drawing of a line, Partition, the movement of Muslims and Hindus… We are really interested in its spaces for resistance.

BB: We then left the gallery and literally around the corner it was peaceful. The protest was very localized. Then we started to get messages from friends asking if we were okay. They were watching the riot on television…

KM: And the television presented it as if the whole of Islamabad was burning…

BB: Hence The Museum of non Participation is interested in the “limits of language,” the representation of events, and in questioning how we meet events and ideas. The project also asks where art and artists are situated in all this. The experience in the National Gallery represents being inside one contested space and looking out at another contested space.

In Karachi, a city without a museum of modern art, museum- hood began to interest us, including the idea that “museum” is a western term that does not translate into Urdu. So we began to work with the concept of a museum without walls, a boundary-less museum. A return to the original Greek idea of the museum, a border-less extension between art and life…

In Karachi, you are directly exposed to geopolitical tides, you can feel them in everyday life, but here in the UK, there are intervening structures that insulate us. So, in fact, I think that non participation does exist, that we live in a constant state of non participation, even if we are not aware of it. One could say that the decision to not do something is as relevant as the decision to do something.

EM: SO, AT ITS FOUNDATIONS, IS THE MUSEUM OF NON PARTICIPATION ALSO A POLITICAL ATTEMPT TO GET OUT FROM THIS SAFE POSITION AS IT APPEARS IN THE METAPHOR OF THE MUSEUM?

KM: Yes, that’s it exactly.

EM: HOW WAS THIS CONCEPT OF NON PARTICIPATION TRANSLATED INTO THE PROJECT ITSELF?
BB: Mostly through dialogue about the concept of resistance. We came up with four different themes: “Architecture of Destruction,” “The Body, the Social Space, and the Aesthetic of Resistance,” “Image, Control and Authority” and finally “The Museum of non Participation.” Then we created debates around these themes involving very different people, so each dialogue became manifest in very different forms. For example, Adefa Suleman presented a performance in which she playfully agitated the public space with her body. The performance came out of the discussion on “The Body, the Social Space, and the Aesthetic of Resistance” and the question of gender in non participation.

EM: WE ARE NOW SITTING IN THE LONDON VENUE OF THE MUSEUM OF NON PARTICIPATION, WHICH IS ACTUALLY LOCATED IN THE BACKYARD OF A BARBERSHOP. IT’S AN INVITING PLATFORM AS A SPACE—THERE’S THE NEWSPAPER THAT HAS BEEN DISTRIBUTED WITH THE DAILY JANG, AND ALL KINDS OF OTHER MEDIA. CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THIS SPACE?

BB: In Karachi, we used local distribution networks to intervene in the public sphere, including tandoor wallahs, booksellers, public walls and a radio station—an interpretation of the city itself as a museum site. Nevertheless, it was obvious that the same distribution networks we used in Karachi would not work in London, a city with many art museums as well as a long history of radical public art projects. So upon our return to Karachi, Karachi came out of limitations—the limits of language and what we could access and what we could not. We would most easily access the elite circles, but we could not at first access other levels of society. That’s where we got obsessed with the notion of accessibility and intervention in different social spaces. Crossing boundaries became one of the leading threads of the project.

EM: YOU ALSO HAD A SERIOUS CONCERN ABOUT APPROACHING PUBLIC SPACE AND THE WAY INHABITANTS OF DIFFERENT SOCIAL BACKGROUNDS NAVIGATE WITHIN THE CITY.

BB: A lot of the ideas that we worked on in Karachi came out of limitations—the limits of language and what we could access and what we could not. We could most easily access the elite circles, but we could not at first access other levels of society. That’s where we got obsessed with the notion of accessibility and intervention in different social spaces. Crossing boundaries became one of the leading threads of the project.

EM: THIS STAGE OF THE PROJECT HAS THE ART TANGENT INSTITUTION BEHIND IT. I AM CURIOUS TO KNOW ABOUT THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AND THE COMMISSIONS INVOLVED IN THE TWO YEAR LONG PROCESS.

KM: In collaboration with the ArtTangent curator Rachel Anderson, we challenged certain institutional conventions and the politics of the UK’s cultural policy. For instance, education is a major force behind some of the most interesting art projects of the last few years, which have however been marginalised as “educational programs.” Through this collaboration, we were able to define a community through the art project and not the other way around.

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EM: HOW DID YOU CREATE YOUR REASONS FOR USING TEXT BANNERS IN SUCH AN INVASIVE WAY IN PUBLIC SPACE?

KM: The relationship between text and action is another important issue. Karachi has a whole textual narrative written on walls. It runs through the public space in a system that is both informal and formal, legal and illegal....Walls start to seem like surfaces to hold texts. So we mounted our museum with temporary signs that we just can put up ourselves. That minimal intervention opened up the space for a new way. For example, we were in the city center where we put up a sign encouraging people to come over and read the word “museum.” A storefront owner saw us from the heritage industry, so he introduced us to a woman who showed us the back of the building, which had dissolved, and where people were living in horrendous conditions. Others thought we were there to measure the building in order to kick them out and make them homeless.

BB: So here we have a situation where we have a text as image, image as object, image as event—

KM: —and text as action.

BB: I also remember that in Karachi, we really tried to get our text onto the half-finished Hyatt building.

KM: The Hyatt has stood unfinished for fifteen years and is now a kind of public monument for the failed implementation of property relations, whether that failure be due to corruption, land ownership disputes or just budget deficits. It’s a highly contested space at the heart of the financial district, a half-built structure that is now a military outpost. It is only when you try to get out your camera to photograph the Hyatt—and are promptly stopped by the armed patrol—that you find you are in a controlled zone because of the hotel’s proximity to the Marriott hotel and the recent terrorist attacks on international symbols like the Marriott in Islamabad.

BB: That’s also why we never need to build a Museum of non Participation, because it is already there—we just have to appropriate the spaces.

KM: In some way, we are less about producing new things than about claiming and pointing to what is already there.
Cities Unbuilt

Photo: Keren Miya and Brad Butler
In Algeria, Islamic fundamentalists and the French ministry (unbeknownst to each other) have found consensus. Islamic fundamental groups have begun to refer to satellite dishes (antennes paradoxales in French) as antennes para’Dia’boliques (devil dish) and distasteful for reality. For Augé, the “Mai thème” of language is a matter of measures. For simplicity rather than complexity; for issue; for the current over the historic; for certainty rather than doubt. The abstract nature of this is impossible to quantify precisely. For Augé, the “fictionalization” of the world is underway, resonant with predictions that have been humanized for years. In the words of a French Ministry of Social Affairs report, “We risk those with satellite receivers being manipulated by foreign powers, all the more so in that the number of dishes is constantly growing, particularly in the banlieus… In addition, the various channels broadcast in Arabic, which could undermine years of literacy classes and other efforts at Gallicising these people. Moreover the religious content of some programmes will probably increase the Islamisation of the banlieus.”

Every morning in Karachi, I read the local newspapers. This became a pattern. The front pages of the international and local newspapers told me how day might go. In these troubled times, news headlines had direct impact on my sense of freedom around the city. The distance I was prepared to go from home. Most articles were lucid, intelligent, balanced and current, but as the days and opinion cycle past, so too is interest in these articles waned. A few articles were lucid, intelligent, balanced and current, but as the days and opinion cycle past, so too is interest in these articles waned.

What if television, cinema, education and the news were seen as a vehicle for distorting the truth, to the extent that we were all being colonized? A brief introduction to how language can be a powerful weapon for reinforcing the consensus view of the world.

words by BRAD BUTLER

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The danger in this is that this use of language simply confirms the consensus view of the world—a framework of popular assumptions. This was dramatically presented in articles on the Mumbai attacks. For example, you have the pretend outrage in The Daily Mail that terrorists could use our own technology against us: “Terrorists steered their vessel using GPS equipment. A satellite phone was later found abandoned. Once the coordinated attacks began, the terrorists were on their cell phones constantly. They used BlackBerrys to monitor international events and present a false reality to the authorities and the police response via the internet.” Yet on the other hand, you also have the immediate repeat fictionalization of the same events as an explanatory attachment to authoritarianism. For example, you have the pretend outrage in The Daily Mail that terrorists could use our own technology against us: “Terrorists steered their vessel using GPS equipment. A satellite phone was later found abandoned. Once the coordinated attacks began, the terrorists were on their cell phones constantly. They used BlackBerrys to monitor international events and present a false reality to the authorities and the police response via the internet.”

The truth is that we are now all embedded in modernity. This is how the modernist perspective works. We all share conditions of modernity, and at least some identities, with each other. Consequently, we all have the same understanding of the rules of narrative? Could this article still be valid?”

ON LANGUAGE AS VIOLENCE

COLUMNS & CORRESPONDENCE

Para-Fiction: Pakistan

Paradigmatic experiences such as these are being played out every day in a contemporary global condition of incoherent layers of mediation and incommensurability. If we had time to acknowledge it, then we would notice that hardly a sentence goes by that does not merit interrogation, hardly an image goes by that does not merit interrogation, unless the decision was taken to suppress precisely that. Which is why so often, for life to proceed, it’s a matter of measures not being taken. But we do not have time; instead, we are constantly in the process of making ideological decisions to curtail such discussions, in the interest of getting things done.

Apartheid

Augé describes this situation as a contemporary crisis caused by a saturation of images that have destabilized our relationship to the world. For Augé, the “fictionalization” of the world is underway, resonant with predictions that have been humanized for years. In the words of a French Ministry of Social Affairs report, “We risk those with satellite receivers being manipulated by foreign powers, all the more so in that the number of dishes is constantly growing, particularly in the banlieus… In addition, the various channels broadcast in Arabic, which could undermine years of literacy classes and other efforts at Gallicising these people. Moreover the religious content of some programmes will probably increase the Islamisation of the banlieus.”

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with the intentions of burning him the following day. The Houston
Post reported this "lynching party" with enormous approval. There
was no sense of fear of the law intervening, nor, indeed, of any
guilt of any kind. In this sense, the logic was correct; it perfectly
safely served to report the lynching. A bit more recently, I found a
review in the New York Times that talked about a particular book in
terms that seemed to me to contain a xenophobic implication. The
authors were billing themselves as subjectivists and, so long as
they wrote within their safe parameters, their claims that a small
percentage of the population owns all the wealth and people can only
access it if they sell their labor power. That assumption wouldn't
have been made if you question the underlying assumptions th
izes journalism as the once-essential profession is bound to
die from the very same disease it was originally supposed to
fight: misinformation.

words by NICK DAVIES

When commercialization penetrates journalism, the once-essential
profession is bound to die from the very same disease it was originally
supposed to fight: misinformation.

AUTHOR
NICK DAVIES is the bestselling author of Flat Earth News: The Destructive
Force of Unproven Assumptions. His four books include Being
Bristolian, Vietnamese, Greek, Dutch
translated into Italian and Chinese. In November 2009, the University
of Westminster made him an honorary fellow "for services to journalism".