

artesmundi



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Karen Mirza and Brad Butler: The Museum of Non-Participation

An essay by Larne Abse Gogarty

Karen Mirza and Brad Butler's practice continually expands into new partnerships, groups and forms of co-authorship. Their process of working with Bertolt Brecht's learning play *The Exception and the Rule* in *The Guest of Citation* is emblematic and the version presented as part of *Artes Mundi* follows on from iterations in New York and Minneapolis. In each instance, Mirza and Butler take this tale of oil, exploitation and the rule of law as the bones for an investigation of how collective activity can take shape in that location. Using the methods of the Brazilian director and activist Augusto Boal, Mirza and Butler meld these theatrical forms in order to deepen and return to themes that have permeated their practice since the inauguration of *The Museum of Non Participation* in 2007. Prompted by viewing the Pakistani lawyers' movement protests through the windows of the Islamabad Art Museum, *The Museum of Non Participation* investigates neoliberal life through an imaginary and mobile institution that invites its visitors to question the possibilities of active withdrawal. The 'Acts' which comprise the collection of *The Museum of Non Participation* ask us to consider how our lives ricochet off histories and geographies seemingly disparate from our own. In navigating between these works, both an image of social relations under capitalism and a potential locus of resistance is uncovered.

As with their layering of Boal over Brecht, Mirza and Butler's triangulation of two or more references or procedures in their work often produces a palimpsest effect where form becomes politicised. In Mirza and Butler's collaboration with author China Miéville, *Deep State* (2012), bodily movement and language traverse from expressing structural violence to becoming the material which permits a speculative forging of new languages, gestures and politics. The film sees Mirza and Butler tracking grammars of

resistance and their repression through the recent and ongoing uprisings in Egypt, the Occupy encampments and the Movement of the Squares to May 1968 in Paris and Northern Ireland in the 1970s. *Deep State* is studded with portals, plot holes and prisons and the recurring ebb and flow of popular protest meeting police batons accumulates into a frustrated image of thwarted utopias. Interrupting this cycle, a red shirted language teacher compels us to go further and retrieve and reanimate eruptive moments from the past, a gesture akin to Ernst Bloch's notion of radical non-simultaneity as the liberation of the still possible future from the past.¹

The figure of the language teacher invokes the possibility of 'more than images of change' and powerfully reappears in the sister film to *Deep State*, *Hold Your Ground*. Originally produced for installation at Canary Wharf station in London, the film responded to the injunction against protest by the Canary Wharf Group following Occupy London. The stark, reduced colours are visceral; red for the red flag, blood and scorched earth whilst the black skin of the teacher confronts the real and symbolic whiteness of her surroundings. The room from which her seemingly undecipherable messages are communicated is equal parts space pod, white cube gallery and padded cell. It is state violence, the sterile art world and the possibility of another future.

The materialist approach to language in *Hold Your Ground* is also evident in *The New Deal*, a work which Mirza and Butler developed for their solo show at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. *The New Deal* is an intricate deconstruction of four UN

¹ Ernst Bloch (1935), (trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice) *Heritage of Our Times*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, p. 110-11

▼ *Museum of Non Participation, The Guest of Citation*, performance still, 2013, Courtesy of the artist and Performa13.



Resolutions on Iraq, two dating to 1990 and the Gulf War, the others from 2002 and 2003. Titled after the programs initiated by President Roosevelt's Democratic government from 1933-1937 to bring the USA out of the Great Depression, Mirza and Butler ground this work in a historical moment that has been crucial to ideas of freedom, democracy and the transformation of political economy in the USA. The New Deal introduced laws to reform finance capital as well as inaugurating welfare provision and unemployment relief programmes throughout the USA. By 1990, the date of the first resolution on Iraq that Mirza and Butler pull apart, the ambitions of the 1930s to reform capitalism had mostly crumbled. Between 1990 and 2003, the final vestiges of the New Deal order was decimated by a succession of political administrations dedicated to securing a neoliberal consensus. It is Mirza and Butler's contention that the language of the Iraq resolutions provides us with a glimpse into

the purest refinement of this consensus, with the rhetoric of freedom and democracy providing the legitimising veneer to administered brutality.

In *The New Deal*, the language of the UN provides the material for a series of diagrammatic drawings and marginalia, again returning to Mirza and Butler's interest in politicising the formal properties of text and image. Mirza and Butler contradict and interrupt the Resolutions, adding in details to produce a Brechtian realism where the causal networks of power and domination are uncovered. The destabilising motion set in play by the drawings, diagrams and text insertions leads the viewer to perceive the Resolutions for what they really are – abstractions which permit the real violence of neo-imperialism in the form of sanctions and war. Importantly, this work dispels the idea that neoliberalism is merely ideology, or that the mediated spectacle of war can only be felt as simulacra, a theme returned

▼ *You are the Prime Minister*, 2014 . Courtesy the artists and Waterside Contemporary.





to more fully in *The Unreliable Narrator* (2014). In replaying the tangible effects of war in text interruptions and by connecting the abstractions of legal jargon to material realities, Mirza and Butler pursue a line of thought which goes beyond institutional critique. Joined up with the speculative, sci-fi inspired *Deep State* and *Hold Your Ground*, the afterimage of Mirza and Butler's aesthetic is one where reality frequently appears more absurd than fiction.

In their work with the Resolutions, Mirza and Butler claim the UN as a *Museum of Non Participation*. This nominal strategy plays out the dialectical qualities of the concept, where active withdrawal is less autonomous protest, and more akin to the libertarian, free market ideals which underpinned the behaviour of the US and its allies in Iraq following the UN Resolutions. This move is homologous to the way Mirza and Butler deploy the mythical site of the New Deal, and underscores how the reformist ideals pursued in that moment are inseparable from the mangled rhetoric of freedom and democracy which first underpinned Cold War ideology, and now fortify the perpetual War on Terror. *The Museum of Non Participation* oscillates between appearing as a strategy of refusal and a condensation of capitalist interests, thus acting as a prism through which we come to a deeper sense of complicity and the stakes of social change.

The mythic qualities of designating the UN as a Museum of Non Participation connects to the idea of gossip which permeates *The Patriarchal Clock*, a new project Mirza has initiated with Rachel Anderson. Reclaiming the historic meaning of gossip as a word to designate all-female gatherings and casting off its patriarchal connotations with exclusion and normative judgment, this work continues the investigation of language as malleable and expansively political. At Artes Mundi, Mirza and Anderson initiate an all-woman over-night gathering with the desire for new forms of political intimacy. Connecting to feminist art practices of the past which sought to carve out an autonomous space

within institutions, *The Patriarchal Clock* also marks a growing interest in the idea of counter-publics and history from below within the *The Museum of Non Participation*. Taking shape in a necessarily ephemeral form, *The Patriarchal Clock* returns to the project of asking how suppressed knowledge and practice can be re-animated once more in the present to produce new futures.

Beyond its object-life, *The Museum of Non Participation* continues to accumulate new 'Acts' in the encounters around the work. As in Mirza and Butler's description of the concept as a political plastic, the work at Artes Mundi provides a ground from which new possibilities will emerge. The cumulative aesthetic in all these 'Acts' – from the build-up of gesture and speech in *Hold Your Ground* to the diagrammatic marginalia of *The New Deal* – can each be taken as autonomous events, cell-like microcosms of *The Museum of Non Participation*. Existing within and between these cells, *The Museum of Non Participation* as a radically open concept expands and contracts into new ecologies, always re-establishing itself in relation to new audiences and collaborators.



► *Deep State*. 2012 HD video, 45'. Courtesy Waterside Contemporary, London

