

# Just Saying No

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON ON THE MUSEUM OF NON PARTICIPATION

IT'S APRIL 19, four days after the Boston Marathon bombings, and I'm on my way from the Minneapolis airport to my hotel. As the radio broadcasts news of the search for the Tsarnaev brothers, my taxi driver comments on the ironies of the phrase *criminal justice*. I'm in Minneapolis to attend the opening of the Museum of Non Participation's exhibition at the Walker Art Center, "The New Deal," which focuses on questions of political speech, the grammar of rights, and discourses of protest.

Created by London-based artists Karen Mirza and Brad Butler in 2007, when the two were living in Pakistan, the Museum is a peripatetic series of workshops, presentations, installations, and collectively devised performances. Its origin story is fable-like: Visiting the National Art Gallery in Islamabad one day, Mirza and Butler found themselves trapped inside by a melee just beyond the institution's doors, where a mass demonstration by the Pakistani Lawyers' Movement had been met with extreme police violence. Then and there, the pair conceived their conceptual project, a wide-ranging inquiry into how art production can, and cannot, be reconciled with contemporary crises. Their endorsement of what they call nonparticipation does not entail a rejection of political involvement (or of participatory art practices, for that matter). They think of

nonparticipation not as failure to engage, but as a space of possibility—as in opting out, boycotts, strikes, and other forms of withholding. Under the Museum's flexible rubric, they have generated specific responses to conditions in locations from Egypt to Germany. "The New Deal" marks their itinerant institution's first visit to the US.

One focal point of the opening is a performance of Bertolt Brecht's 1929 "teaching play," *The Exception and the Rule*, which uses the tale of a merchant and his servant to impart a lesson about class antagonism. The staging is the culmination of a series of workshops in which Mirza and Butler explored Brecht's text alongside artists, activists, performers, students, and workers from the Twin Cities, using the methods of the late Brazilian director Augusto Boal. Mirza and Butler have a serious, long-standing engagement with Boal, who in the 1970s developed the radically participatory Theatre of the Oppressed. Here they put into practice his theories about interactivity and the conversion of the audience into "spect-actors." I arrive too late to see the play, and, as a nonparticipant, I can only try to forensically piece together what happened. I question some of the players, examine photos, scour the written materials. I am frustrated that there is no video documentation. Meanwhile, as what is being gruesomely called the

"Boston manhunt" progresses, Google Earth homes in on a location, freezes on a blurry boat.

I am present for the other event that weekend, a discussion featuring sociologist Avery Gordon and artist Sharon Hayes. Gordon speaks about local legacies of nonparticipation in relation to Minnesota's abolitionist movement. Hayes, whose own practice (like that of the Museum of Non Participation) investigates the ways in which power relations are embedded in the structures of language, presents excerpts from the transcripts of the trials of detainees at Guantánamo Bay. Hayes reminds us that the detainees are on hunger strike—another refusal.

In addition to their work with theater, Mirza and Butler make audiovisual and text-based pieces, and "The New Deal" features a selection of this work. In their affecting video *Hold Your Ground*, 2012, a woman repeats a series of Arabic phonemes, as if struggling to

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teach, or learn, the language—a striking embodiment of thwarted communication that also signals the hopeful emergence of nascent dialogue. A large installation juxtaposes art from the Walker's collection with four United Nations resolutions on Iraq, presented as annotated documents of escalating length; the resolutions' cold syntax of authority is thrown into relief by carefully curated works, including a Kerry James Marshall print, Jenny Holzer's still-potent *Truisms*, 1977–79 (a litany of maxims like AN ELITE IS INEVITABLE), and Carl Andre's 1972 poem "Am Am Not Am Not Willing."

Every encounter with art is informed by the conditions of viewing. At the Walker that weekend, debates rage about when, exactly, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev should be read his Miranda rights. In a joint statement, Lindsey Graham and John McCain say he shouldn't be Mirandized at all: "Under the Law of War we can hold this suspect as a potential enemy combatant not entitled to Miranda warnings. . . ." In this, the brute power of lexical mechanisms—the import of the designation *enemy combatant*, the capacity of a spoken invocation to delineate a person's fate—is made manifest. But what happens when political actors reject language entirely? Such rejection can produce a deadly literal-mindedness, so that injured bodies become the medium of protest, bodily destruction the expression of rage. We cannot opt out of discourse without opting out of ethics too: We are part of the conversation whether we like it or not. The Museum of Non Participation reminds us of this, proposing that the tactics of cultural production—Brecht's allegory, Holzer's semiotic excess, Andre's reticent prosody—can be used to develop more nuanced and productive means of withdrawal. Perhaps this is why "The New Deal" feels like such an urgent and timely provocation. □

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The Museum of Non Participation's performance of Bertolt Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule*, 1929. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, April 18, 2013. From left: Susy Bielak, David Kim, Rigoberto Lara Guzmán, Karen Mirza, Alejandra Tobar, and Aaron Rosenblum. Photo: Olga Ivanova.

