



Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, *You Are the Prime Minister* (neon sign), 2014, curtain, desk, chairs, neon. Installation view.

## LONDON

### Karen Mirza and Brad Butler

WATERSIDE CONTEMPORARY

Karen Mirza and Brad Butler's "The Unreliable Narrator" presented the emergent twenty-first century as one that is both authoritarian and anarchic, a divide articulated through the division of the single gallery space into two rooms via red theatrical curtains. The first room one entered resembled an examination hall, in which a neon sign reading *YOU ARE THE PRIME MINISTER* (reflecting the title of the piece; all works 2014) shone over three school desks. An examination paper had been placed on two of them, with a question taken from a real Eton College King's Scholarship exam, while the answer sheet lay on the third. The exam presents a scenario set in the year 2040, when riots have erupted after Britain runs out of fuel due to an oil crisis in the Middle East. During two days of army intervention on the government's behalf, twenty-five protesters are killed. "You are the Prime Minister," the paper reads; your task is to write a speech addressing the nation to justify the use of violence as both necessary and moral.

The installation was viewable from the street outside the gallery through its storefront facade (which allowed daylight to seep in), mirroring the open institutionalization inscribed in an examination administered by a school reputed to breed Britain's leaders. By contrast, the second room, located behind the curtain, was dark. Projected on two screens was the chilling sixteen-minute video from which this exhibition took its name, which charts the series of coordinated terror

attacks by the notorious Lashkar-e-Taiba that took place in Mumbai between November 26 and 29, 2008. The video features a seamless weave of CCTV footage and dramatized reenactments taken from the 2013 Bollywood movie *The Attacks of 26/11*. A female narrator both reports and reflects on events. At points, audio excerpts from the "Terror Tapes"—Indian intelligence-service intercepts of terrorists talking to their controllers on mobile phones—are heard. On the implementation of such mobile technology in these attacks, the narrator notes: "They're using our own tech-

nology against us." This observation links back to the examination paper presented on the other side of the curtain, a flimsy divider between two opposing sides represented in each room. This division was highlighted when the video's narrator called the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks a reminder that "nation states are not the only game in town" (and when she contrasted the "active martyr" with the liberal individual).

This mirrored reflection (or inversion) was further articulated on a blackboard presented alongside the video. This work, *Act(s)*, foretells (in the long text by Rachel Anderson that was written on the blackboard in white chalk) an unpredictable and unexpected revolution that will speak "a language we won't understand because we never listened before." Yet this language—though different—is recognizable in how it is used to construct narrative; the resemblance is underscored in the video when the Bollywood camera lingers on a smoky hotel lobby, projecting a clash of civilizations through the image of "Muslim gunmen in burning five-star opulence" with "Hindu gods in the foreground." The narrator observes how the "perpetrators" whose "bloody fragments would be mixed in with the body politic" closed a loop in death: one that forms a narrative from which popular myths and heroes are fashioned. It is a loop that Bollywood closes in on, too, in which fact becomes fiction. This is chillingly articulated when a controller tells his cell to give the government an ultimatum. "Say this was just the trailer," he says. "Wait until you see the rest of the film." Here, the meaning of any political act—whether committed by a terrorist or the state—is shown to lie in the construction and deployment of its mythology. Opposing sides use the same tools to resist other narratives while imposing their own.

—Stephanie Bailey