

Mirza & Butler

PROFILE >

Maxa Zoller

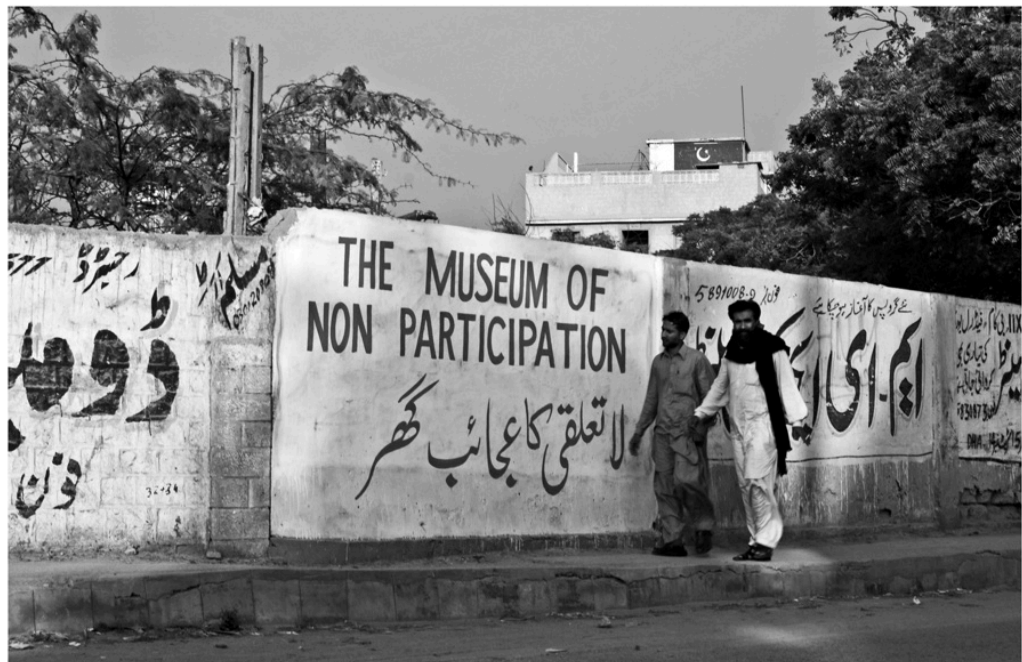
FOR ONE MONTH LAST OCTOBER, a small room behind a Pakistani barbershop on the Bethnal Green Road in East London served as the main site of the Museum of Non-Participation, an art project by London-based artist duo Karen Mirza & Brad Butler.

One could easily assume from its title that the Museum of Non-Participation (MNP) was a form of archive, conserving and presenting documentation of actions of non-participation: a shrine of relics of resistance, of artists' refusal to partake in capitalist production. Far from it. The MNP is a conceptual construct that – unlike normal exhibitions – has no fixed physical locus or temporal limit. The first materialisation of this work-in-progress literally 'took place' in the space behind Yaseen's barbershop, which perfectly exemplified the heterotopic space by becoming a cinema, a shelter for gatherings, meetings and workshops, a library, a classroom for Urdu language courses and container for Mirza & Butler's ascetic conceptual artworks. In the middle of the room, a long table displayed stacks of supplements, specially edited by the artists, of the Pakistani newspaper *Daily Jang* while also serving as a screen

for a slide show projected from the ceiling onto the table top. The slides, and a television monitor in the far right corner, presented public interventions of the MNP in Karachi and Islamabad, while on the left-hand wall hung a framed print, a taxonomy of newspaper headlines titled *Disturbances Pre-Planned*. The artists' new experimental film *The Exception and the Rule*, 2009, which played on a small monitor, was shot during a residency in Pakistan and London. The 40-minute film explores the relationship between power and image production by playfully confusing the conventional roles allocated to subject, filmmaker and audience. Interweaving time-lapse shots of Karachi's busy street life, documentation of performative interventions in the urban space and re-enactments of works by artists Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Ryszard Wasko and Vito Acconci, *The Exception and the Rule* addresses the issue of colonialisation through the image, a phrase coined by the French anthropologist Marc Augé to whom this film owes much of its theoretical gravitas.

Artists working in the decades subsequent to periods of economic euphoria (the 1960s following the postwar economic miracle and the 1990s in the aftermath of 1980s deregulation) tended to consider participation a 'good thing'. In contemporary western society participation sprawls interactively and unbounded at the distance of a mouse-click through the stream of digital data, producing new marketing terms such as 'widening participation' and 'crowdsourcing', which are becoming catchphrases in the art 'world' (see Jennifer Thatcher's 'Crunch Time' AM332). In this light, the 'relational aesthetics' works of, for example, Rikrit Tirvanija and Tino Seghal can be seen as conduits for – rather than as forms of resistance to – the

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The Museum of Non
Participation: *Boundary*
Wall Intervention 2009



commercialisation of communication in post-industrial, neoliberal society. The MNP offers a less self-assured, more precarious mode of participation refusing to conform to a simple application of the strategies of Institutional Critique, by which I mean the attacking of a hostile power that is allegedly exterior and separate from the artist whose liberalist intervention is based on moral superiority and political correctness. The events at the MNP, in contrast, provided a discursive platform focusing on debates around the politics of the public sphere and art, investigating basic modes of communication and language, not only through various open seminars, with titles such as *On Language as Violence* and *Writing the City*, but also by focusing on Urdu – the fourth most spoken language in the world and Pakistan’s main language – through free Urdu classes as well as the production of the specially commissioned supplement of the *Daily Jang* newspaper. Published in English and Urdu, the newspaper focuses on what is lost in translation (for instance, the Urdu word for ‘museum’ can only be translated as ‘the House of the Unexpected’).

More event and idea than exhibition or object, the MNP proposed an open relationship between artwork and audience, one that stretched beyond the control of the artists. Questioning the very foundations of their own practice, Mirza & Butler consciously include themselves in the problem that is the MNP. In fact they prefer to describe the MNP as an ‘action’ or ‘gesture’. Following the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s observation that gesture occurs at the limits of language, the MNP can be seen as a symptom of an art language in crisis, whose precarious state is open rather than established, gestural rather than verbal. By ‘an art language in crisis’, I mean that the economic breakdown of the art industry that flourished post-1989, the paralysis of conventional artistic and theoretical strategies in the face of global politics which, combined with the crisis of the Left and the impotency of political activism, have given rise to numerous debates, thinktanks and conferences that have discussed the question of agency (‘criticality’ as a post-avant-garde placeholder), new paradigms (Nicolas Bourriaud’s notion of the ‘altermodern’) and art practice in the so-called post-medium condition (‘New Institutionalism’).

Returning to Agamben and his notion of a ‘politics of gesture’ as a ‘means without ends’, it could be said that the MNP has turned art into gesture, in the sense of an incomplete act or movement whose destination is, as yet, outside form and language. This is also reflected in the relationship between the MNP and London’s contemporary art scene. Commissioned by Artangel Interaction Projects, which places emphasis on process rather than product, the MNP is supported by the UK’s institutional structure while carving out a space in the larger social sphere both physically, outside the gallery context (a room behind a barber shop), and conceptually, through its paradoxical and open condition. This in-between state was deeply inspired by a political event that occurred during Mirza & Butler’s artists’ residency in Islamabad in 2007. While visiting a nude exhibition in the National Gallery of Islamabad, the artists witnessed first-hand the Lawyers’ Movement riots which arose as a result of Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry’s refusal to obey military ruler General Pervez Musharraf’s order to resign from his position as the Chief Justice of Pakistan. This refusal sparked a chain of events, including massive rallies and so-called ‘Long Marches’, then, in November 2007, General Musharraf imposed a state of emergency, an act reserved only for the country’s president.



Watching the violence unfold from the window of one of the most disputed art exhibitions in the National Art Gallery, the city outside and the gallery inside were transformed into sites of confrontation. Sandwiched between these two manifestations of protest the artists found themselves in a liminal, paradoxical space, which became the inspiration for the MNP. The museum visitor experiences this paradoxical experience at face value: upon entering the room behind the barbershop, the visitor was confronted with the question: how can I not participate in this museum now that I’ve entered it? Following the artist Andrea Fraser’s claim that ‘we are the institution’, the intelligence of the MNP lies in the impossibility of its being captured because it is everywhere where we are not. This paradoxical experience leaves its audience in a moment of uncertainty, or non-closure, and arguably of self-agency, which differentiates the MNP from the first ‘social turn’ of 1990s relational art. ■

Mirza & Butler
The Museum of Non
Participation: *Yaseen
Hairdressers, Bethnal Green,
London 2009*

The Exception and the Rule
2009 film still

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