



## Artists at Work: Karen Mirza and Brad Butler

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Gemma Sharpe

*Karen Mirza and Brad Butler's artistic practice is based on collaboration and dialogue. Their approach includes film-making, drawing, installation, photography, and performance, as well as publishing and curating. Since 2004 they have run the artist platform and screening space [no.w.here](#), in London. This interview focuses on Mirza and Butler's most recent film *The Exception and the Rule* (2009), which forms a part of their current project, 'The Museum of Non Participation' (2008-ongoing). The project was developed over two residencies at [Vasl Artists' Collective](#) in Karachi, Pakistan, where the 'Museum' was composed of workshops, a newspaper, street interventions and public events. With support from the *Artangel Interaction Programme*, the 'Museum' was established in London in 2009, where it temporarily occupied a space behind a Pakistani-run barber's shop on the Bethnal Green Road. *The Exception and the Rule* was shown in this space along with a library, a specially edited newspaper, and a running programme of events, language classes and public seminars.*

*The Exception and the Rule was mostly filmed in Pakistan and India, and its miscellaneous and modular narrative frequently crosses the border of these countries. In the latter half of the film this border is presented directly, as an 'Intermission' that consists of footage from the daily India-Pakistan border ceremony, at which guards on each side lower their national flags and perform an 'opening' of the dividing gates. Using film, video, found footage and photography, *The Exception and the Rule* throws its own site, narrative and production into question, particularly through use of direct (though unacknowledged) citations, its ambiguous application of fictional elements, and through a use of text and spoken English or Urdu. Though micro-repetitions of sounds or words become an aggravating aural presence within the film, there is never a point of repetition or return within its wider framework; one cannot resume contact with a place, a person or a scene that has been previously witnessed. Though *The Exception and the Rule* begins and ends in London, this concluding site of return is transformed by a shift in visual content and filmic handling. In addition to a formal shift in this treatment of site, the scenes and images gathered in South Asia now inflict upon London and its translation into film.*

**GEMMA SHARPE:** *The Exception and the Rule* emerged through and after a number of journeys that you've made in India and Pakistan. What initially led to you make this film?

**KAREN MIRZA:** We are both very interested in 'nomadism', or the artist as a nomad who moves and travels within a frame of work and working. So our engagement with India was first developed over a five-year collaboration with Shai Heredia in 2002, with whom we helped to establish the Experimenta Film Festival in India. We also curated the Cinema of Prayoga, a film programme that toured the UK in 2006. Through these projects my understanding of 'nomadism' started to shift my view on Modernism, in particular the complex negotiation that arose from the recognition that I had grown up within a predominantly Western-centric frame of Modernism. In a sense Brad and I became avid collectors and archivists of what this might mean, and we interrogated how this could develop our practice. We started making work that directly problematised the relationship of the camera to the subject of the camera, and also the camera's agency in public space. There was a certain activism that we were already engaged with in London, and we repeated this sense of production and facilitation in Mumbai, drawing together research of histories, and parallel cinemas within India as part of the festival. Whilst we were taking part in this we started carrying our camera with us, and thinking through the making of work there. Taking a camera out in India one discovers a very different relationship to the apparatus, and also to your context and your subjectivity as a film-maker. Undoing that frame of cultural references started to activate the process of *The Exception and the Rule*.

**GS:** Throughout the process of making the film and coordinating the 'Museum of Non Participation' you would have encountered a deluge of information that you could not have expected. How did you translate this 'deluge' into *The Exception and the Rule*? Because it seems to me that what appears to be the film's miscellany is actually its fidelity to a varied process of making. How does the film respond to and then reflect the sheer weight and mass of material that you have been dealing with?

**BRAD BUTLER:** For me one of the main issues was about how to deal with the complexity of what we were experiencing. In particular in Karachi, we came to feel that we were being saturated with politics throughout the everyday. Of course, in the UK we also experienced this, but you can't miss direct political questions when you're in a place like Karachi, where you encounter these quite amorphous and abstract geopolitical forces all the time. This led us to think about our relationship to the issues we were experiencing, including how we could make visible our situation in relation to our (postcolonial)

conditions of production. The idea that *what* we see is a condition of *how* we see became a significant in both *The Exception and the Rule* and 'The Museum of Non Participation'. This led Karen and I to start working, not so much with what was inside the camera frame, but rather with what we couldn't capture, and our discussions became about getting a sense of the boundaries and the limits of our inclusion and exclusion. *The Exception and the Rule* and the 'Museum' present this to the viewer so that he or she might feel like they're passing through those interrogations within the filmic scenario - in other words, the project not only profiles the viewer's encounter with the material, but also what they bring to this encounter.

**KM:** When you generate lots of ideas and material, you have to negotiate the problem of translation in editing this down into a work. But to add to your question about the generative strategies of our practice - which is a research-based practice in which reading and theory is key - our methods of research were really 'tested out' by setting up a number of generative situations. The video workshops in Karachi, the newspaper interventions, the English/Urdu classes and the seminars in the 'Museum' all facilitated a way of working through ideas individually and collaboratively. Collaboration is foregrounded within *The Exception and the Rule*. It's carried all the way through the process, even to the film's mythical character of Raj Kumar, who stands in for all the collaborators that contributed to its material and ideas. There are also 'migratory forms' here, as a lot of the film's expressly cinematic ideas are enacted in 'The Museum of Non Participation'. You could almost see the film being a large template within which the 'Museum' fits, and at the same time that it's a work that itself sits inside the 'Museum'.

**GS:** Could you relate the film to others that you made before it? For example, *Where a Straight Line Meets a Curve* (2003) has a similar Structuralist sensibility.

**BB:** *The Exception and the Rule* is part of a line of thinking that goes way back to our initial meeting of disciplines and the energy created around that. I came into the collaboration from anthropology and Karen had an art history and painting background. We used these differences to 'interrogate' each other, though now I think that we would never split up our interests in this way. We are far more conscious of the overlaps. The first film we made together was called *Non Places* (1999), where we intended that the viewer would *experience* the politics of representation as opposed to *facing* the problems of the politics of representation. *Non Places* was a concept articulated by anthropologist Marc Augé, who argued that a symptomatic part of the logic of late capitalism is the ever increasing proportion of our lives spent in supermarkets, airports, hotels and on motorways. *Non Places* sought to embody this observation in a cinematic experience, where the cinema itself is proposed as a non-place where a transitory occupant experiences the illusion of being always and never at home. *Non Places* used a number of subtitled textual loops without sound, so the viewer had to internalise the text and give it his or her own voice, and also potentially take in some of the violence of the film's space - the psychological violence that we were working with. This film also critiqued the tension and violence attached to the cinematic portrayal of such non-places as underpasses, empty streets, stairwells and corridors. *Where a Straight Line Meets a Curve* was our first colour film and in that piece we wanted to address our collaboration directly. The film aims to pull focus between the physical space and a mental space, and almost halfway through it breaks down a 'white cube' into a psychological space.

**GS:** The place of a film-maker in a byway in Mumbai is extremely contested, and you seem very conscious of that. But what's not necessarily as contested here is the gesture of appropriating or even 'plagiarising' other artists' work. Within *The Exception and the Rule* you restage Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969), for example, and you drop lines of Georges Perec's writing into the narrative. How does this bear out in relation to other moments of borrowing?

**KM:** Clearly the use of appropriation, misappropriation, and crediting and discrediting is entirely conscious. But it leaves me with questions that we're taking through into the next film. I still wonder now whether we should have credited everybody - so, in a sense, Vito Acconci should be there in the end credits as a kind of collaborator. There is a scene with the crows in Mumbai by India Gate and the soundtrack at that point is from *The Birds*, so we could have also put Hitchcock in there as a collaborator too. But maybe it's not fully developed because there are omissions, and I do think a lot about those omissions now.

**BB:** On reflection I agree with that totally. But I don't want to lose the critical point of your question, which is this idea of the ethics of appropriation. In *The Exception and the Rule* the appropriated voices within the film are in dialogue with the unfolding of the film's making. We are interested in how much of the original meaning of our appropriated texts survive these acts of cultural translation. So ethical tensions like this are also made explicit within the film, as we want the viewer to destabilise his or her own relationship to the images that unfold: to actually have to confront the very ideas of ethics that those representations imply. There are several moments of self-criticism in the film, which were built in from the start and that operate both as points of rupture and as punctuation throughout.

**KM:** The question of ethics is definitely there, and thinking about appropriation there is a latent question about voice: whose voice? who is speaking on behalf of whom? who has the authority? These sorts of questions are posed by participatory projects, and certainly when one uses other artists' works like this.

**GS:** Within *The Exception and the Rule* you indulge in specificities of knowledge. An audience in South Asia may be less accustomed to the filmic references that you employ as they come largely from a Euro-American canon. Similarly, as you 'jump' over the India/Pakistan border throughout the film, you're utilising another layer of specificity that might disadvantage any viewers who do not recognise markers of place such as Urdu or Hindi scripts, for example.

**KM:** Seeping through the film and the 'Museum' is the idea of translation,- not only translation between languages or cultures but also translation within language. In a sense for me, after making *The Exception and the Rule* I started to think again about the audience. The film has a dispersed audience and interestingly enough, the most satisfying reading of the film for me has actually been in the Arab regions. We showed the film in Cairo and here for example, there was a reading that involved a cultural and geographical knowledge that was outside the South Asian context of the film, and also the European and North American context that it relates to.

**BB:** Your question brings up a reading of the film that we would hope for, and now we can really connect the film to 'The Museum of Non Participation'. There is the issue here around the point at which one's knowledge allows access to particular experiences and levels of engagement. In Europe, many viewers recognise the Acconci or Dan Graham references and in Cairo, the interesting thing for me was that instead, viewers read the conditions of the film's production. They recognised the constraints of making a film somewhere like India or Pakistan. Gemma, you're conducting this interview from Karachi on Skype, and we are in London. Right now you are directly immersed in the context that we were living in when making *The Exception and the Rule* and you are well aware of the conditions for production there. You handle this interview with that in mind. People who have never been to a place like Karachi don't necessarily understand these conditions. You are in this unique situation right now and so were we. It is a privilege to be able to make that journey: to be there and to experience the complexity of what it means to live there. But taking Pakistan as an example, our argument is that we all have a relationship with Pakistan, whether we have been there or not. This is where we begin to think about the terms and conditions of (non) participation.

Interview conducted between Karachi and London, March 2010.