The idea that who you are might, in some way, be separate from what you do would be an anathema to long-time collaborators, Karen Mirza and Brad Butler. Ric Bower caught up with them in their artist-run space, no.w.here to discuss *The Museum of Non Participation*, the project that has seen them short-listed for this year’s Artes Mundi Prize.

Interview and portrait: Ric Bower
Art direction: Danielle Rees

**Total Immersion**

The Museum of Non Participation has recently been nominated for the Artes Mundi Prize, the international biennale that focuses on visual practitioners who, in some way, seek to engage with the human condition in its many and varied forms. Mirza and Butler will thus be making new work in Cardiff over the summer for the Artes Mundi’s opening in October.

As we settle down to converse, Brad offers us blankets to ward off the chill; apparently the space ‘really comes into its own’ in the summer months. Brad paces as he talks. I began by asking Karen to establish a connection between her personal narrative and her particular creative approach.

Karen Mirza: From the outside looking in, it must have seemed a dangerous place for me to be. When I came to London I did not know anybody, I was very young and I had dropped out of...
Brad Butler: what kind of build up is that?

KM: ...we are posting ‘non-participation’ as a means of revealing that which is unseen.

BB: ...but the anger was there, and that is kind of missing the point, anyway. We came out of college with nothing, no money, no space to make work and there was absolutely no interest in us. So, we started slowly building. I felt like Karen and I found each other and we formed this position; us.

KM: That speech they gave us on the first day, do you remember? ‘You are the best of the best’ and yet, there were only two working class and three black people in the whole school! Our own approach has accumulated slowly over time. I don’t think we could have put language on it when we first started no.w.here...
But: That’s two different questions you are asking really, but there are a couple of people in my mind. In his work Disagreement, Rancière states ‘Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account’. The second person I think of is Judith Butler whose passage, The Performative Frame, I have tattooed on my arm. ‘The frame builds and confirms acts for those who would name them as such. To learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter. And, if there is a critical role during times of war, it is precisely to thematise the dehumanising norm, that restricts what is perceivable and, indeed, what can be.’

You tattooed it, just in case you forget it when you are old.

But: What Judith Butler is saying is that inside ‘seeing there’s a condition of “unseeing” and the conditions of power and politics dictate what can be seen and what cannot. She doesn’t use the term “deep state” — that’s a term we use — but that is the core of what she is saying. We are not thinking about power solely in the way that Foucault would think about it, although it’s a great reference, and we are not thinking about politics just as Rancière would, we are positing ‘non-participation’ as a means of revealing that which is unsee.

The universal colonisation of capitalism means that we are incapable of imagining another way of thinking. Our language, our vehicles of dissent, are adopted by corporations and commodified. We are left stranded as our tools of dissent are hijacked.

KM: We were thinking about participation very much in terms of violence, we are positing participation, not as a smooth process, but as an uncomfortable and difficult, even a violent one. One Rancière quote was made very real to us when we were in Pakistan: ‘Contemporary art? Sure. But contemporary with what?’ I found that contemporary practice was in sync in Pakistan — it was locally rooted and engaged with tradition in a way that it is not so evident in the West. Their school of miniature painting, for instance, which uses a traditional vehicle to address contemporary issues.

But: I disagree with pretty much everything that you have just said, Karen. My memory of art in Pakistan is that art operated only in ravelled and exclusive spaces.

KM: That’s a different conversation, of course there are huge fucking problems. There are not many places in the world where you risk getting shot at by the opposing party at an exhibition, because they do not like one of the images.

BB: Well, at least they’re recognising that art has power. I’m guessing that Karen is initiating a discussion around the relationship between the aesthetics of the work and the political context in which it’s made, and that Brad is saying that this can never be separated. Are we happy with that?

BB: No, I don’t think we have much in the way of a right to speak about these things. We have not been out there since 2008.

KM: How do you marry up the aesthetic/formal and the conceptual realms within your practice?

BB: It’s slippery. There are so many points of entry to an idea I don’t think we would even use that language.

KM: I found the layering in Deep State built in a complexity that was anti-didactic, but I also felt that I was not off the hook. I was being encouraged, or even provoked, to engage personally and politically. How has your aesthetic been honed as your practice has developed?

BB: I can narrate the development and the forms and the spaces that have been honed as your practice has developed?

KM: Deep State can only come about in this kind of non-linear trajectory. Our aesthetic has been honed over years of collaboration. Deep State, for me, is an archive of the critical, political materiality that happens in our lab downstairs. I can narrate the film through the way that we’ve worked with the image. It makes evident the complexity that we find in time, history and ideas.

BB: I guess that makes it harder to box in. It becomes displaced.

KM: I am always looking for the extraordinary to surface within the mundane and everyday; that’s what I seek in the aesthetics of an image.

BB: Slightly exhausted, we make some portraits together, then retreat down the long staircase. As I emerge onto Bethnal Green High Street, I have a profound sense that I have witnessed something special. On the surface, Mirza and Butler’s ecumenical practice appears complex, dauntingly so. But this is not the complexity of obfuscation, it’s a complexity borne of the need to disrupt patterns of thought. We are politely invited to leave our expectations at the bottom of that long, white staircase.

Mirza and Butler are fully immersed in their practice. The space in which they live is the space in which they work is the space in which they show. It is a space that is infused with altruisms, this is demonstrated by the number of emerging practices they seek to nurture. The mirage of modernism has no place here; there is no distilled isolationism in the way they think, no Cartesian separation between the subject and object or author and work. Perhaps, the time has come for all of us to sit up and listen to what they have to say. — CCQ