

KAREN

MIRZA

BRAD

BUTLER

Live and work in London.

The Museum Show, Arnolfini, Bristol 2011

The Daily Battle, Vivid, Birmingham 2010

The Museum of Non-Participation, an Artangel commission, 2009

Mirza and Butler's multi-layered practice consists of filmmaking, drawing, installation, photography, performance, publishing, and curating. Their work challenges terms such as participation, collaboration, the social turn and the traditional roles of the artist as producer and the audience as recipient.

Since 2009, Mirza and Butler have been developing a body of work entitled 'The Museum of Non Participation'. The artists have repeatedly found themselves embedded in pivotal moments of change, protest, non-alignment and debate. Experiencing such spaces of contestation both directly and through the network of art institutions, Mirza and Butler negotiate these influences in video, photography, text and action.

In 2004, Mirza and Butler formed no.w.here, an artist-run organization that combines film production with critical dialogue about contemporary image making. It supports the production of artist works, runs workshops and critical discussions and actively curated performances, screenings, residencies, publications, events and exhibitions.

Mieszkają i pracują w Londynie.

The Museum Show, Arnolfini, Bristol 2011

The Daily Battle, Vivid, Birmingham 2010

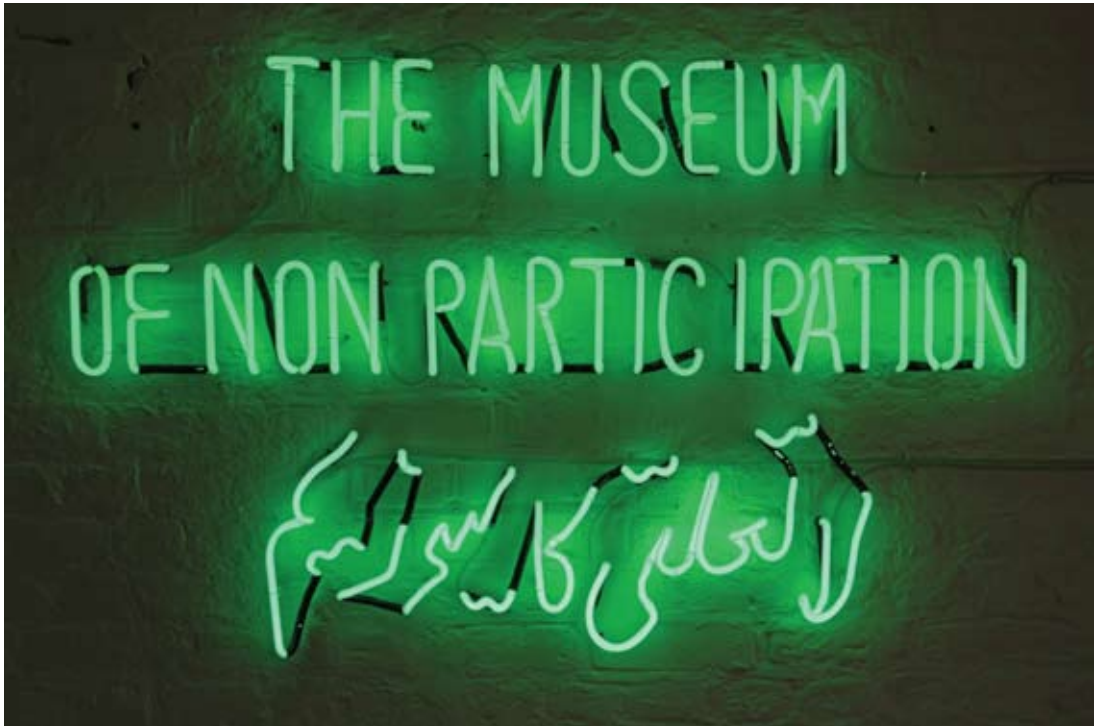
The Museum of Non-Participation, Artangel Commission, 2009

Wielopłaszczyznowa praktyka Mirzy i Butlera opiera się na tworzeniu filmów, rysunków, instalacji, fotografii, performance'ów oraz na publikowaniu i kuratorstwie. Ich prace poddają w wątpliwość znaczenia takich słów jak: uczestnictwo, współpraca, rozwój społeczny oraz tradycyjna rola artysty jako wytwórcy i publiczności jako odbiorcy.

Od 2009 roku Mirza i Butler rozwijają projekt zatytułowany „The Museum of Non-Participation”. Artyści po raz kolejny osadzili się w kulminacyjnym momencie zmiany, protestu, niezaangażowania i debaty. Doświadczając takich przestrzeni kontestacji, zarówno w sposób bezpośredni, jak i poprzez sieć instytucji sztuki, Mirza i Butler omawiają te wpływy za pomocą wideo, fotografii, tekstu i działania.

W 2004 roku Mirza i Butler utworzyli no.w.here – organizację artystyczną, która łączy produkcję filmową z krytycznym dialogiem na temat tworzenia współczesnego obrazu. Wspierają produkcję dzieł artystów, prowadzą warsztaty i krytyczne dyskusje, a także kuratorują performance'y, pokazy, publikacje, wystawy i wydarzenia artystyczne.

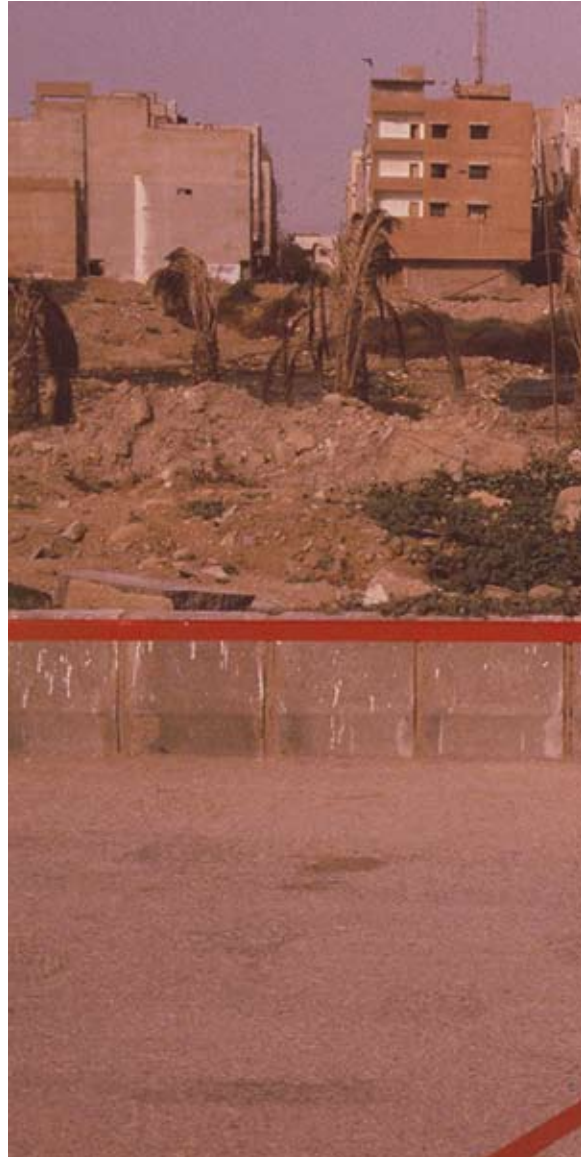




Act 00136,
neon sign, 130×80 cm, 2009



What will the next revolution look like?,
performance at Waterside Project Space, London 2010





Act 00023,
tape drawing, 2009

**NOT TAKING
PART IS NOT
AN OPTION:
FROM BELONGING
AND MEMBERSHIP
TO INCLUSION
AND PARTICIPATION.
PIERRE
D'ALANCAISEZ**

When Marshall McLuhan coined the term ‘global village’ in The Gutenberg Galaxy of 1962, he could not have imagined how quickly reality would outgrow the model he proposed. For the post-war generations, the popularisation of television and aviation brought distant landscapes and realities to the frame of individual experience in unprecedented ways. What developed over the following decades is a paradoxical mixture of illusory ‘nearness’ - the feeling of closeness to distant issues and peoples mediated by news reporting - and an equally illusory feeling of involvement in the affairs of all humanity. The late 20th century citizen felt individual compassion for victims of famines, and took individual action by mandating UN interventions in political conflicts. Before long, the ‘global village’ became a ‘global theatre’.

With this expansion – and simultaneous mediated contraction - in the boundaries of an individual’s intelligible universe, the categories of belonging, participating and membership had to be re-evaluated. A new category of citizen-spectator came into being.

A further complication arises with the arrival of virtual social networks, most poignantly Facebook, in the early years of the 21st century. While urban lifestyles have grown in complexity, so has our need for a new medium of nearness to the things and the people we are distancing ourselves from by favouring of a more globalised existence. Social media have eliminated the issue of distance altogether, bringing equivalence between here and there.

The categories of belonging and inclusion are disrupted again. Communities and social groups can be created online as in the physical realm, and the virtual offers a seductively egalitarian playing field. The very vocabulary of partaking changes: one can join a community, but also sign up to be a member of it, opt in, subscribe, follow or simply Like.

In parallel, institutional artistic practice of the last decades has championed participation. In Western Europe, formal art practices have been expected to engage their audiences in a way never seen before, and to seed solutions to a host of community problems. A new responsibility was placed on art practice to include individuals in the (virtual) realm of art to create a sense of belonging in the everyday.

Such socially engaged work has come under intense scrutiny, and its very aims described as utopian. Claire Bishop notes that “participation strives to collapse the distinction between performer and audience, professional and amateur, production and reception” in a way inconsistent with the real. It is something of an irony that Nicholas Bourriaud, whose Relational Aesthetics normalises the tools of participatory art practice, takes on the re-branding our recent present as Altermodern. With Altermodern, art has caught up with Facebook, and artists have become nomads, hyper- and meta connected with and acting on a plurality of constituencies, markets, agencies and stages.

It should be no surprise therefore that the vocabulary of the individual and the communal has reached a point of crisis, and that terms such as belonging,

membership, participation, inclusion, engagement and incorporation have all found their way into casual parlance without necessarily answering to singular definitions. This lexical difficulty of taking part is a central interest for both Javier Rodriguez and the artistic duo of Karen Mirza and Brad Butler.

Javier Rordiguez was born in Venezuela in 1975, and in the last fifteen years has lived in Caracas and in London. From this dual perspective, he has been able to find unsettling parallels between the disparate social and political systems. While the UK was for over a decade dominated by New Labour dialectics, Venezuela saw Hugo Chávez come into power with the Bolivarian revolution. Britain entered the 21st century with dreamy aspirations like Rodriguez' native country.

The lasting grip of such commonly-contested ideals is counter-intuitive at a time when social media make it possible for information and opinion to travel freely and instantly. Through a practice that spans collage, text, installation and video, Rodriguez has compared the mechanism which keep the UK's and Venezuela's neo-liberal aspirations in their stead, and has found that the forces at play are not as dissimilar as one may expect.

The artist's practice stems from a deep study of media channels, in particular of newspaper publishing. From his early works with collage and books, Rodriguez has an intuitive understanding of mechanical reproduction. He has collected and collated books, pamphlets and posters reflecting the history of Latin America, and has contrasted them with the headlines of contemporary newspapers. The resulting works confound their sources. For example La Voz (The Voice), an installation of hundreds of posters on advertising hoardings in Quito in Ecuador, brings together images of World War II and mobile phone advertising, under a banner of a fictional news outlet.

The term 'mixed-media' aptly describes both the technical composition of the artist's works and their thematic focus. Using newsprint, for example, Rodriguez brings together messages from a variety of sources, processing them with their own means of mechanical reproduction. The resulting works both appropriate and generate content. In 2010, Rodriguez created Último Mundo Universal, a guerrilla mash-up of Venezuela's three largest tabloid newspapers, from which this project takes its title. The publication borrowed images, headlines and articles from the original national titles, and mixed them with surreal graphic imagery, texts borrowed from Slavoj Žižek, faux-advertising for spiritual media phone lines, death notices, and images of war and conflict from a variety of contexts. The publication was distributed, on a single day, through street vendors in Caracas, who gave away copies of Rodriguez' newspaper with copies of the tabloid purchased by the public, causing widespread confusion.

Rodriguez manipulates media messages - through a subversion of the sombre tone of political slogan, through placing serious real-life situations in overtly banal contexts, and by fabricating stories with the authority of a newspaper editor - in direct response to media's own manipulation of reality.

In the UK, Rodriguez has instigated similar projects, and the new publication work launched with the exhibition They don't know why, but they keep doing it has ambitions of similar scale. The content of the publication is not settled at the time of writing, but the recent scandals relating to phone hacking and the resulting closure of The News of the World, Britain's best-selling newspaper, open up an array of issues.

When producing his newspaper works, Rodriguez learned about the amount of waste generated by the lithographic printing process. For every thousand copies of a newspaper, a few are damaged or printed incorrectly, and many hundreds are

at the end of a run are scrapped. Printing houses re-use such waste by printing multiple pages on top of each other in tests, and in cleaning procedures. This way, today's news is an increment of yesterday's rejected headlines, and pages eventually become saturated with type, images and ink. This discovery has prompted Rodriguez to develop a non-verbal vocabulary which mirrors that of his publications. Panels of rich magentas and cyans, or pallets filled with stacks of overprinted graphic novels are at once product, archive and waste. Through the very means of mechanical reproduction, the newspaper comments upon itself, amplifying its headline out of recognition until it becomes aesthetic noise.

This kind of engagement – visible in both Rodriguez's text and colour-field works - is described by Peter Sloterdijk in his 1983 Critique of Cynical Reason as cynicism: a plebeian, popular rejection of mass culture by means of irony and sarcasm. Slavoj Žižek later points out that the ruling powers' response to such cynical subversion is that of classical cynicism: through even more solemn use of moralising rhetoric, and the veneration of the very institutions which the common action sought to destroy.

Rodriguez's production reveals a paradox of cynical subversion. While Último Mundo Universal is a critique of Venezuelan media's romance with the ruling powers, it is also an ideal participatory, user-generated 'media 2.0' product, in which the reader and writer are the same. The reader-writer is implicitly charged with the responsibility for commenting on - but is also disaffected by - the reality which surrounds him.

The position of the reader-writer as a participant of this reality is called into question: Rodriguez (and his viewer) is at the same time a member and consumer of the culture he critiques - absorbing the headlines, the telenovelas, and the political propaganda - but also its opponent – exposing the very same as absurd and damaging. In his work, Rodriguez accepts, rejects and creates the same elements of reality.

For Rodriguez, this position is one of necessity. Faced with the deep and widespread problems of Venezuela, and individual has little chance of opting out of the political system – a voice outside is a voice not heard. A transition from participant to member of the status quo is perhaps the most productive option.

Karen Mirza and Brad Butler's body of work The Museum of Non-Participation addresses questions of belonging and alignment in a direct way. The work came to life when Mirza and Butler witnessed – from a window of a controversial exhibition in a newly-opened National Art Gallery in Islamabad - the Lawyers protest and state violence in 2007. This experience, as well as witnessing other moments of change and protest, has led them to consider their position on either side of this gallery window, and to expand such spaces of contestation as generative.

Since 2007, the Museum has manifested itself in Pakistan, Switzerland, Egypt, Turkey, Germany and the UK, through the network of art institutions and independently, and using video, photography, performance, text and action. In Karachi, Mirza and Butler staged performances in streets and markets, and using tape drawings, banners and signs hand-painted onto city walls, sited the Museum in contexts where a traditional art institution has no place. In London, for a month in 2009, and in co-operation with Artangel, the Museum assumed a home behind a barber shop in Bethnal Green Road in East London, hosting Urdu language classes, talks, debates and events, inviting the local and art communities alike.

The title of The Museum of Non-Participation reflects on its own structure and function. The Greek mouseion is a museum without walls. In Urdu, linguistically the project's birthplace, there is no original word for 'museum'. Instead, a composite word used in substitution translates back into English as 'house of the unexpected'.

In this sense, the Museum makes an attempt to seed an anti-apparatus, to allow for a framework which acts against the prevailing system of powers and relations. In marking the presence of an institution, Mirza and Butler's may ask about our position inside or out, but by only drawing walls with temporary tape and fabric banners, they open up attitudes to issues reaching far beyond institutional critique.

Like Rodriguez, Mirza and Butler have occupied newspapers as medium and used them as source. On the occasion of their 2010 exhibition The Daily Battle at Vivid in Birmingham, Mirza and Butler negotiated a temporary, autonomous space for a series of writers and thinkers on the pages of the Daily Jang, Britain's only bilingual Urdu-English daily, from which the exhibition took its title. In London, they created a special edition of the same tile, and in Karachi, they disseminated their publication by offering newspaper sheets to market vendors to use as wrapping for food and produce. In parallel, Disturbances Pre-Planned (2009) surveys the language of the newspaper articles relating to debates the artists and the Museum have direct relationships with. A lithographic print creates a taxonomy of headlines, including 'The prime minister's confusion', 'Time to take charge' or 'Include me out!'

In a traditional sense, the function of a museum is to collect, display, and interpret. The Museum of Non-Participation takes on these roles also, but it operates in real-life environments. Its collection of images, accounts, debates and gestures reflects the potential of the collective gestures, particularly those made by those marginalised and non-aligned, and non-participating, and the context in which they are made. This potential is contained in physical and non-physical images, objects, words and messages, and the Museum, lacking a physical structure, sites itself amongst the issues it collects and displays as a constituent agent.

At Work shown in They don't know why, refers to the recent exhibition of the same title at the Whitechapel Gallery, consisting of works from the UK Government Art Collection, selected by government figures and, controversially, the prime minister's wife. The display has met with criticism and was seen by some as inappropriate in times of austerity brought about by cuts in UK government spending, and the exhibition's title as insensitive. Groups of protesters from leftist art communities have accused politicians of using art to whitewash their tarnished reputations. For Mirza and Butler, the contested exhibition highlighted the issues of museum collecting, and the inherent transfers of power taking place as artworks are acquired, owned, displayed and written about. Commenting on At Work, the artists reflect on the notion of being collected (or incorporated into a collection), considering the place of an individual in a social group in parallel to the place of an artwork in an art collecting.

Considering the consequences of action and the consequences of inaction, the artists draw a parallel between the two. The Museum's own agency lies in its ability to re-claim the meanings of terms used to describe and formalise our reality. Understanding that non-participation is a condition of participation, the resultant compound word-definition internalises the problematic of the social turn, keeping constantly aware of its own strengths and potential. In an institutional sense, the museum is a generous and open structure, accepting freely any intuitional critique its public may serve.

An asset to both Rodriguez and Mirza and Butler are the perspectives offered to them in their international orientations. For Rodriguez, the study of contrasts between Venezuela and the UK activates a productive relationship, and for Mirza and Butler the catalyst is in the ability to draw links from a variety of contexts ranging from East London to Cairo. The key is that contexts are already inter-present: London already

contains Cairo, and Caracas already contains London. It is not 'here and there', but rather 'here and elsewhere'.

With Mirza's and Butler's non-participation representing in fact the collective agency of the non-aligned, the issue of taking part is as central and complex to the pair's practice as it is for Rodriguez. The artists are at once producers and audiences, but not in the sense proposed by relational aesthetics. Rather, they hold deep a sense of investment in a number of contexts, in which they are act as agents. Actively creating realities and discourses, they partake in their successes and failures. For the artist and their audiences, not taking part is not an option.