London-based artists Karen Mirza and Brad Butler are often cited for their ongoing work *The Museum of Non Participation* (*MoNP*). Initiated in 2007 as an Artangel commissioned project, Mirza and Butler’s peripatetic fictional museum addresses issues of power, privilege, and participation in everyday life. Without a dedicated physical space, the *MoNP* has taken a variety of forms, including a newspaper, performances, site-specific interventions, a neon sign, and workshops at various international locations—always with the intent of interrogating the politics of participation at its hosting sites. As the artists state, nonparticipation is “a condition embodied in the need to participate and the simultaneous need to withdraw, including the question as to how withdrawal can be made visible.” The term, which at first can be misunderstood as a negation, is in fact an expansive conceptual tool used by the collaborative pair to understand the status of individual and collective agency in society at large. Most importantly, it serves to reveal the oft unseen structures that guide social relations between people, cultures, and nations.

In concrete terms, Mirza and Butler’s museum has addressed issues of postcoloniality in Pakistan and India, the history of social struggles in the United Kingdom, the politics of representation and revolution in the Middle East, and the global implications of United States military warfare. Mirza and Butler’s practice is marked not only for its alignment with activist politics and an exploration of the aesthetics of resistance as the content and subject of the work, but also by the artists’ direct engagement with these issues in the world beyond the white cube. The *MoNP* is self-consciously aware of the narratives around participation and participatory practices in contemporary art, which Mirza and Butler’s work directly constitutes through the numerous collaborations and community engagement projects they have carried out under its auspices. At the same time, responding to shifting notions of the twenty-first century museum as a space of consumption, leisure, and entertainment, the artists use participation in a manner that is critical of these prevalent modes of cultural production and the commodity-driven, populist agendas that have come to govern contemporary cultural spaces. The themes running through Mirza and Butler’s practice and the body of the *MoNP* are tantalizingly complex and provide much fodder for study.

Of particular interest is how a primary focus on the moving image as a political agent and a subsequent exploration of performance-based practices has engendered Mirza and Butler’s hybrid and multiplatform work. The artists speak of the many components that make up the *MoNP* collection as “acts.” This term provides some insight into the interdisciplinary nature of their work. Seen within the framework of cinematic history, we are reminded of the term *entr’acte*, the intermission between different acts in the presentation of a film. Consequently, we can conceive of the entirety of the *MoNP* as a durational piece that is punctuated by a sequence of acts. Extending this metaphor further, the artists use the traditional function of the *entr’acte* as a tool to shift the flow and components of a narrative to move between forms, leveraging the crucial gaps between the different iterations of the *MoNP* to work across media. The necessity of the different platforms in Mirza and Butler’s practice as they respond to ever-shifting social conditions and sites for the reception and dissemination of their work is further articulated by the artists’ insistence on finding “different strategies to talk to different forms of power.”

By and large, Mirza and Butler locate their collaboration in a shared interest in “politically and philosophically motivated cinema.” They go on to mention that in their attempts to continuously “find the edges of cinema’s authority” they have extended into performance and political theater, among other media. Mirza and Butler are observant students of experimental film practices of the 1960s and ’70s, on the one hand taking

---

**By Yesomi Umolu**

**Feature**

**Body, Speech, and Resistance: A Reading of Recent Works by Karen Mirza and Brad Butler**

a cue from the history of structural film—in which the politics of the image became inseparable from the materiality of the filmstrip—and on the other, also being deeply indebted to a reading of “films made politically” through the lens of Jean-Luc Godard, who recognized the contingent nature of the image vis-à-vis the biases of the filmmaker and the film’s production and viewing context. This approach, which Godard strengthened during his “leftist trip” years in the late 1960s and early ’70s, provides a strong reference point for Mirza and Butler’s own forays into an “engaged” cinema. In relation to the history of British cinema, Mirza and Butler also build on a lineage of independent filmmaking that addresses the postcolonial condition, multiculturalism, and class struggles as pioneered by the likes of seminal media groups such as Black Audio Film Collective in 1980s Britain. With these influences in mind, and many more, Mirza and Butler’s film and video works represent a distinctive voice that infuses elements of the documentary, reportage, ethno-cinema and, most recently, science fiction. Considered alongside other filmmakers currently practicing in the UK and elsewhere, their work is certainly set apart from a generation interested in filmic excess, high dramatization, and even higher production values, as it continues to maintain the affiliation of experimental film with collectivized political action. For the purposes of this text, it is instructive to consider the relationship between the body, speech, and resistance in their work—particularly in the recent videos Direct Speech Acts (2011) and Hold Your Ground (2012).

Mirza and Butler’s statement that nonparticipation addresses the question of “how withdrawal can be made visible” essentially posits that through this term they investigate forms of articulation, and what can and cannot be enunciated. This is reflected in the three-channel video Direct Speech Acts, which offers three overlapping enactments of political speech. On the first screen, actor and activist Khalid Abdalla stands on a street in Cairo reading aloud from a book discussing the representation of the Arab male in film (a role he has played several times in his Hollywood career). The second screen offers images from the 2007 exhibition Act of State—A Photographic History of the Israeli Occupation, curated by theorist Ariella Azoulay, and the final screen depicts artist Nabil Ahmed speaking about the 1952 language movement demonstrations in Bangladesh. Each is a highly personal articulation of the complexities of identity and cultural affinities in the face of overarching power structures—each speaks through the oppression of a specific body—the Arab male, the Palestinian citizen, and the Bangladeshi student and political activist. The work moves not only between these three subject positions but also between three different visual forms: documentary footage, the photographic archive, and studio filming, respectively. The first testimony appears to be a single take captured from a moving source, beginning with a close-up of the actor and then moving out into the streets of the city; the second flicks steadily through images from Azoulay’s exhibition; and in the last, Ahmed, who is featured from the shoulders up, comes in and out of focus as he speaks in English and Bengali, occasionally accompanied by subtitles. Each self-contained testimony is interrupted by a number of filmic devices. A voiceover intervenes in Abdalla’s speech with a punctuated repetition of his words: “spectacle,” “conflicts,” “ambiguity,” and so on. The second screen is given the same treatment; words such as “agent,” “displacement,” and “abjection” accompany the images. In the final screen, as sound and image move in and out of sequence, a floating black rectangle appears over Ahmed’s eyes and mouth to obscure the basic communication channels from his image. The temporal disjunction that occurs in each segment of the work also extends to the entire piece, since the simultaneous screening of the segments causes each act to flow in and out of the others; at times they exist as an accumulation of voices while at other moments they descend into dissonance. With this work, Mirza and Butler explore the relationship between political speech and action, the self and the collective, and voice and silence—bringing to the fore the question of how one enunciates a politics of withdrawal from a very personal position. The difficulty in achieving this is registered in both the physical and cognitive experience of the work. As image and sound inundate the senses, and any conclusions about their implied or derived meaning are disavowed by the continual shifts from frame to frame, the work enacts a very potent and palpable interplay between the legible and the illegible. Additionally, the use of such image and sound manipulation highlights the mechanics of imagemaking. This is furthered through the accents of film-related language that infilrate the voiceovers, such as “framing,” “action,” “lingering camera shot,” “zooms out,” which all read as director’s notes for the making of the work and serve to expose the constructed environment of the work.
The question of the implicit power of the cinematic image to translate political agency is also taken up in *Hold Your Ground*. During the 2011 Arab Spring in Egypt, a pamphlet circulated online. Entitled *How to Protest Intelligently*, it was comprised of a sequence of diagrams and advisory remarks for pro-democracy demonstrators as they took to the streets. The publication detailed such tactics as confronting riot police and effectively moving through the city *en masse*. Informed by this document, Mirza and Butler, who had been engaged in ongoing collaborations with cultural producers and political activists in Egypt prior to the revolution (particularly media activist collective Mosireen), developed *Hold Your Ground*. This single-channel video was originally installed in a public thoroughfare in London’s Canary Wharf underground station and has subsequently been presented in gallery and screening settings.

*Hold Your Ground* borrows its title from one of the captioned illustrations in the pamphlet, which instructs, alongside an image of a demonstrator confronting riot police, “Hold Your Ground, Egyptian! Block the truncheon with your shield as you are spraying them in the face.” From this starting point, Mirza and Butler create a stirring video work that not only speaks to the great social upheavals that marked the Arab Spring but, more crucially, seeks to decode the language of civil resistance on a global scale. The film begins with the stark image of a young female performer set against a white background as she slowly begins to speak in an unrecognizable tongue. To call her enunciations “speech” is, in fact, a stretch, as they are mere monosyllabic utterances—THA-THA-THA; SI-SI-SI; NAH-NAH-NAH and so forth—delivered in a determined and considered tone. Each fugitive sound is accompanied by a series of different gestures, first simple and then becoming more complex: one arm sweeping across the body transitions into two arms cupped together, which move from left to right toward the performer’s chest and then out again, etc. Assigning different gestures and intonations to each phoneme infers multiple meanings—and this multiplicity is emphasized by silent sections of the video in which image and sound are decoupled. Each speech act with its accompanying sequence of body movements is repeated several times. On some occasions, the performer’s eyes lock on the camera, and with each pass, she demands with a slight nod of her head an acknowledgement from the viewer that her seemingly enigmatic message has been understood.

Soon after the performer’s initial sequence of movements, the video shifts to documentary footage of a public demonstration with an accompanying soundtrack of muffled chants. The camera is caught somewhere in the midst of a crowd; as bodies move in and out of frame, the bright yellow overcoat of a British policeman comes into view. Eventually, the video returns to the performer, who continues her gestures and utterances. The video oscillates between these two sets of images through its nine-minute run, moving from the performer, whose speech and gestures develop into complete sentences and fluid movements, to other found footage from historical and contemporary public demonstrations spanning Egypt, Northern Ireland, and England, including those of the Arab Spring and Occupy London. This material was sourced from various individuals and collectives as well as the artists’ personal archives; some depict a harmless mass of bodies, while others show combative moments between protesters and law enforcement. But always, the accent is on the status of the body—under stress—wrestling against force or huddled together with other bodies behind police lines. As time passes, we begin to recognize some of the performer’s gestures as mirroring those of some of the individuals in the documentary fragments. Where occasionally it might be apparent that the performer takes her lead from the found images, the reverse also holds true as she stands as a revolutionary figure seemingly inciting an unmarked crowd to action. In such moments, one recognizes the dialectics at play in *Hold Your Ground* as it meditates on how to teach and disseminate a language of resistance, as exemplified in the original pamphlet that inspired the work. This is not an easy task, as Mirza and Butler have stressed that the choreographed actions of the performer embody the challenge of attempting to teach while at the same time struggling to speak; this in turn represents the nature of spontaneous forms of revolution and underlines the fact of...
that the language of any political movement is always in formation and comes together through direct action.

To confront Hold Your Ground, whether in the public sphere as it was originally intended, or in the gallery space, is to engage in active dialogue between one’s body as a viewer and the bodies represented in the film. This work compels a reaction that is distinctly visceral as one receives, decodes, and comes to understand these images through the body. This is further accentuated by the instructional nature of the performer’s gestures, which play out a process of simultaneously exercising from and inscribing into memory—through the activation of the body—the essential tools of resistance. Here we see Mirza and Butler transposing the methodologies of Brazilian director Augusto Boal’s influential book Theatre of the Oppressed (1979) into film form. Boal’s theatre was predicated on a politics of liberation that used performance as its primary form and the body as a means to represent situations and scenarios of oppression. In working through various performance exercises, Boal sought not only to reveal structures of power, but to embolden his performers with the tools to resist. For Boal, “the Theatre of the Oppressed has no end, because everything which happens in it must extend into life . . . Theatre of the Oppressed is located precisely on the frontier between fiction and reality—and this border must be crossed.” It is important to pause here to consider the relationship between process and product in Hold Your Ground because, in this case, dialogue began with the performer, whose recorded actions were generated through improvisational workshops with the artists. This underscores the fact that beyond being a mere translation of Boal’s methodologies, this work carries with it the residues of a live enactment that transcends the recorded image—as do the found images. Hold Your Ground successfully plays with this oscillation between the “here” of the performer’s actions and the documentary footage, and the simultaneity of these two modes with the “here” of the viewer’s body, moving seamlessly between the space of the imagined, the real, and the possible.

Moreover, the insistence on dialogue in Boal’s methodology is also present in this work in that Boal prioritized ongoing exchange in his theatre for “actors and non-actors,” so too does Hold Your Ground call into being a space of dialogue with the viewer. In engaging in a process of deconstructing the work’s many utterances and visualities, which continuously move in and out of legibility, the viewer is required to produce meaning in the moment. As the work speaks to the viewer in this way, through gesture, body, and the image-event, it offers the possibility of producing a renewed language of resistance. This realm of possibility also extends to the types of images deployed by the artists—those performed in studio and the others captured “in the field.” In using documentary images caught from the heart of heated civil revolts—which, in our current culture of live media feeds and image fetishization, are often stripped of their political agency—Mirza and Butler engage in a broader critique of prevalent modes of representing resistance through the camera lens. This issue raises the essential question of “Who speaks, for whom, and how?” in moments of revolution and social change that inevitably become coopted by institutional and epistemological forces, mass media notwithstanding. By juxtaposing the documentary image, which has historically been the bedrock of “political film” and journalistic reportage, with the studio footage, the work articulates a different language of representation. It takes a cue from Godard, who argues: “there are two kinds of militant films . . . those we call ‘blackboard films’ and those known as Internationale films. The latter are the equivalent of chanting ‘L’Internationale’ during a demonstration, while the others prove certain theories that allow one to apply to reality what he has seen on screen.” Mirza and Butler deconstruct and decode the authority of the documentary image through the performer’s actions. There is a process of learning and unlearning that underscores Hold Your Ground, which comes via the influence of Boal and Godard’s pedagogies of political theatre and militant film respectively, and, like them, seeks always to deny the authority of the dominant system of representation—in this case the documentary image and narrative cinema.

As might be apparent from this overview, Mirza and Butler’s artistic language is continuously coming into being; nevertheless, these works exemplify a practice that courageously attempts to bridge the gap between aesthetics and politics. This is a crucial and urgent enterprise in our current moment in which notions of the political in art practice are increasingly distilled. To work within the realm of the political, the artists strive to continuously move between forms not only within the confines of a single piece, but also within their practice as a whole, because to solidify a format would infer that they were speaking from a fixed position. Similarly, like the MoNP, each piece is embedded with an internalized function of critique: to continually disrupt and disavow its own position as an artwork with inherent power dynamics. Through their conception of language as a fluid medium—whether addressing the language of resistance or the language of cinema—Mirza and Butler are opening up news spaces for meaning and aesthetic innovation to emerge.

YESOMI UMOLU is assistant curator at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University.