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## Total Immersion

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**

We turn left at the very top of a very long and straight flight of stairs and are ushered into a white attic room, buckled and tucked in amongst Bethnal Green chimney stacks. This is no.w.here, the artist-run space set up in 2004 by Karen Mirza and Brad Butler. The interior is covered in white paint and rough board, but it is no white cube. The path Mirza and Butler have trodden might be defined by just one word: engagement. Indeed they have fought to carve out a viable space for a practice that is justified by the communities and conversations it engenders, rather than its perceived value in the marketplace.

In 2007, at the time of the Pakistan Lawyers' Movement in Islamabad, Mirza and Butler inaugurated the *Museum of Non Participation*. They witnessed some of the demonstrations against Pervez Musharraf, and worked over the subsequent 18 months to accumulate considered responses from within a range of Pakistani communities. The project found form as a 'pop-up institution' in Karachi, a non-museum in a city that has no official museum of its own. *The Museum of Non Participation* is securely lodged within intricately formulated, conceptual frameworks, but it is not bound by temporal or geographical constraints. This freedom has allowed the duo to continue using it as a creative springboard for the last five years.

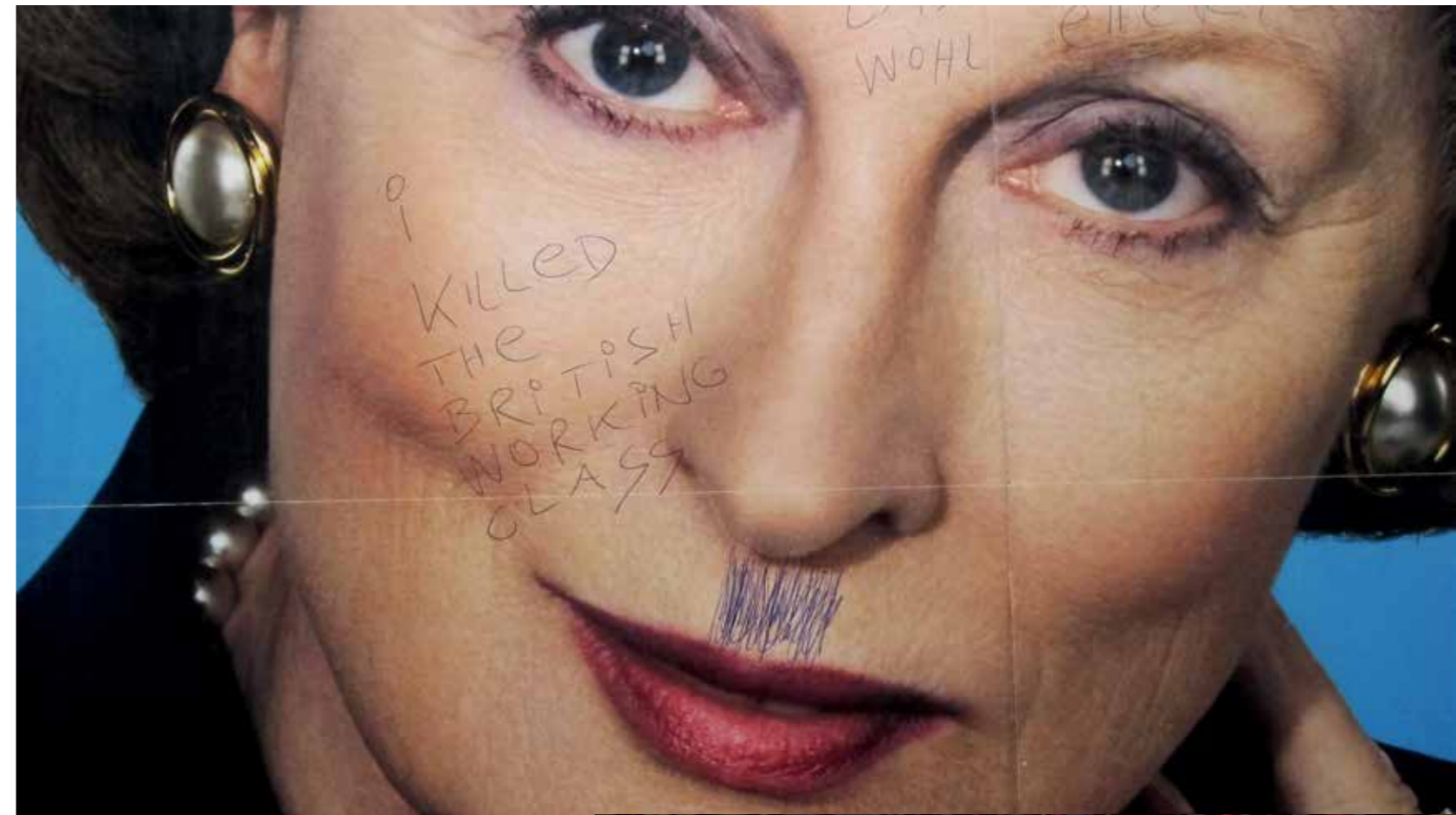
The *Museum of Non Participation* has recently been nominated for the Artes Mundi Prize, the international biennale that focuses on visual practitioners who, in some way, seek to engage with the human condition in its many and varied forms. Mirza and Butler will thus be making new work in Cardiff over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









## CCQ Features

>> formal education. University was not even on my radar and I became part of the late 80s' club scene. That post-punk, create your own tribe, DIY energy sustained me into my early 20s. When I straightened out and figured I should get a job... then I met Brad...

**Brad Butler:** ...what kind of build up is that?

**KM:** ...so I did gophering for a small design company. I had a great boss who let me have time off to do classes at St. Martins. In the early 90s, I went to Camberwell. The course seemed good at the outset, but it didn't take long to work out it was party to the broader neo-liberalisation of the art schools. All the great tutors had already left in protest. We campaigned, of course, and took over an empty space, which happened to be the toilets. When any intellectual visited the building we would pounce on them and drag them off to the toilets for impromptu tutorials. I went from Camberwell to the Royal College of Art (RCA) which is where our story together starts.

**BB:** I came from a place of restlessness over social injustice. I had done anthropology prior to the RCA. I had never come in contact with art. For an anthropologist, it was an amazing two years.

**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...

**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 against the world. That has changed over time, because, although it can be the source of a terrific angry energy, it comes to the point where your conversations end up being quite closed. We had built something — the lab, with all its cine film equipment downstairs — and that had pretty much killed our creative practice. We were seen as being facilitators rather than practitioners.

**Ric Bower:** People do like to categorise — practitioner, facilitator, curator, film maker or whatever — don't they?

**BB:** When you take a position, people find their own uses for you. I don't think that all of what we do could be categorised as art. A lot of it Artes

Mundi would never see — the stuff we do in our communities remains unannounced — but that is how we operate. Much of our battle now is getting the terms and conditions right for us to even start making work.

**RB:** Many view socially engaged practice as just another 'ism'. It strikes me that you are fully immersed, living, as you do, in your work space in the heart of Bethnal Green with all manner of folk banging on your door, at all times of day and night. How do you negotiate this?

**KM:** I think there was a point when we tried to utter and articulate our frustration. We needed to find expression for a fully-engaged practice, where you cannot separate the social from the political and the economic, the public from the private and the domestic. *The Museum of Non-Participation* was an attempt to find a way to speak about those relational aesthetics. The socially engaged was still, in our minds, rooted in the commodification of creative practice and it was still feeding the same old values that are in turn feeding the market. The things that are complicated about this space — the question of whether it is a home or a public gallery space — are exactly the point. It's a politics of hospitality. Our private selves contract when there is a public event here, because 90% of the space at that particular time is owned by the community. They have rights to the space in the same way that we do. Yet, come 10pm the same night, the people leave and our private selves expand; you can't legislate policy for that. I suppose the networks, our peers and the conversations we have over a screening, when we fuck something up in the lab or even when we are just having food together, these things are important. They are fermented over very long periods of time. Engagement is not a smooth process; it is contested, conflicted and uncomfortable. The downside, of course, is not being able to disengage. I tried to take two days off a while ago. I went to a spa and, whilst I was sitting in the steam room, I heard the voice of a friend of mine

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who happens to be a hardcore, ultra-left activist. We could not really see each other, but we could hear each other's voices. We wound up talking about how desire had become so commodified and so risk-averse. That is what no.w.here is about in the end — it is holding a space open where risk can occur, where failure is celebrated.

**BB:** It is very much like living in perpetual crisis, but at the same time, at its core, it's an art school, in its purest sense. The artists here own the means of production, but it is not enough for them to own it. We have to teach people to use it, which is where the education comes in. Then, of course, since we are making work, we should also create a space to show it. We, personally, have never been able to show our own work at no.w.here... Thinking about it, we have shown it once, in fact...

**KM:** ...it was in secret though.

**RB:** There has to be a degree of altruism in the mix then?

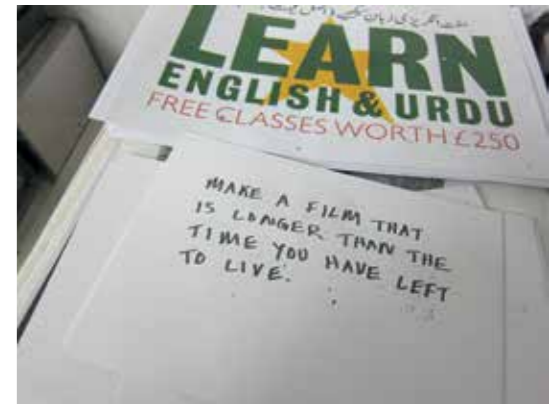
**KM:** Indeed, and that means showing work that we would not necessarily be aligned with...

**BB:** ...or that we even like!

**RB:** You are simply allowing the conversation to occur.

**KM:** 'Live Better, Fail Better', the Beckett quote, is inscribed above the door of the lab downstairs. We want to create a space where people are encouraged to fail.

**BB:** The freedom to fail is a political project for us. In order to do this, we are not concentrating so much on the output. Outputs are important of >>



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>>course, because they mark moments; it's not so much about the failure itself as an end, but about completely inhabiting methodologies and processes, which means accepting failure as a necessary condition of success.

I know now that we need different strategies to talk to different locations of power. I didn't know that when we started out. We've held this space open for ten years and, in London, that is one of the more radical things you can do. The time will come, though, when we hand it over to someone else.

**KM:** I have always thought of our practice as intervening, creating openings, physical or imagined. Part of that process of intervention is the hijacking of resources, when the corporatisation of culture is becoming increasingly oppressive. To illustrate, huge condos have been built on top of both the studios in which we have worked prior to no.w.here. The first, in Kingsland Rd — you will like this — is called Ability Plaza and the second, at the end of the road here, is called Avant Garde Towers. It is built right on top of the studio in which we used to work. JG Ballard could not have made it up!

**RB:** Paul Rabinow expands on Foucault as saying that 'power is everywhere, diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge and *regimes of truth*'. You speak a lot of politics and power, could you clarify your particular approach to them?

**BB:** 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 Forcible 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 forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanising norm, that restricts what is perceivable and, indeed, what can be.'

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

**BB:** 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

unseen. 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.

**BB:** I disagree with pretty much everything that you have just said, Karen. My memory of art in Pakistan is that art operated only in rarefied 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.

**RB:** 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.

**RB:** 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.

**RB:** 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?

**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.

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

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

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 altruism, 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**

**Karen Mirza and Brad Butler** are exhibiting *The Unreliable Narrator* at Waterside Contemporary 2 Clunbury Str, London N1 6TT info@waterside-contemporary.com waterside-contemporary.com tel +44 2034170159 from, 12 June – 9 August 2014

The Artes Mundi Exhibition is in Cardiff 25 October 2014 – 22 February 2015 www.artesmundi.org

1. *Studio space*, Karen Mirza and Brad Butler
2. *Karen Mirza and Brad Butler at no.u.here*, photography: Ric Bower, art direction and grooming: Danielle Rees, photographer's assistant: Amber Bower
- 3, 4&5 *Deep State*, Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, HD film 47 minutes, Commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella, c/o Waterside Contemporary (London) and Galeri Non (Istanbul), 2012
6. *Milk Snatcher*, Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, c/o Waterside Contemporary (London) and Galeri Non (Istanbul), 2014
7. *Red Medalist*, Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, c/o Waterside Contemporary (London) and Galeri Non (Istanbul), 2014
8. *Riotonaut*, Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, c/o Waterside Contemporary (London) and Galeri Non (Istanbul), 2014
9. *Studio space*, Karen Mirza and Brad Butler
10. *Deep State*, Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, HD film 47 minutes, Commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella, c/o Waterside Contemporary (London) and Galeri Non (Istanbul), 2012
11. *Studio space*, Karen Mirza and Brad Butler



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