

is tangled in telephone wires. A crew ties a rope to the telephone wires and pulls them down in order to drag the man closer to the ground, while another crew builds a mountain of gravel to serve as a platform for the dangling man. The man is slowly pulled down toward the mound and the film ends with his lifeless body lying on top of it. *Tochka* (2010) also has a symbolic ending—a line of workers solemnly cross a bridge that they have built across a narrow trench. As the trench was small enough to have jumped across, the crew’s construction of the bridge seems to have ritual rather than practical function.

Perhaps the title “Nothing New” is not a proclamation of sameness, but an allusion to the ending we all face. The characters in these films, with nowhere new to go, accept the end.

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GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON PROTEST

Five Acts: Chronicles of Dissent

Marginal Utility

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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The timing of an exhibition that focused on acts of protest and global conflict in the months following the dissolution of Occupy Wall Street encampments across the United States was undoubtedly fortuitous, if coincidental. With the memory of those recent protests, in addition to the ongoing uprisings inspired by the Arab Spring of 2011, the show at the Marginal Utility gallery in Philadelphia provided an opportunity to reflect on the current state of global protest and demonstration in the context of aesthetic responses to unrest throughout the past decade.

Curated by Yaelle Amir, “Five Acts: Chronicles of Dissent” featured the work of five international artists who address themes of protest and demonstration in their work. Video, audio, and photographic works by Yael Bartana, Andrea Bowers, Sharon Hayes, Naem Mohaiemen, and Mark Tribe were displayed in the somewhat close quarters of the Marginal Utility space. Amir, however, made the best use of the limited space to ensure that each piece had sufficient room to carry its own message.

Upon entering the gallery, the visitor was confronted with Bartana’s video installation “Wild Seeds” (2005). The video showed a group of teenagers rolling around in a field, alternately forming groups and pulling apart. Initially, it was difficult to tell whether these young people are fighting or playing with one another. The soundtrack, which was both audible and shown as



text in a separate projection, was equally ambiguous. It required further research to learn that Bartana, an Israeli artist, created the video in response to the 2002 evacuation of the Gilad Colony, an Israeli settlement. The actions of the protagonists in the video were left intentionally ambiguous in order to reflect the conflicting responses to this event in Israeli society.

From Bartana’s installation, the viewer moved to Hayes’s “I March In The Parade of Liberty, But As Long As I Love You I’m Not Free” (2007–08), an audio and text installation in which the dominant component was a recording of a woman narrating what at first sounded like a combination of an individual love story and commentary on contemporary political events. This disjunction was reinforced when the viewer read the text included in the installation: a poster with the work’s title printed in the cheap, block style often used to announce an upcoming march or demonstration. And, indeed, the text itself, with its references to marching, liberty, and love, continued the confusion engendered by the audio narrative playing in the background. The narrator in the audio was, in fact, Hayes herself, recorded reading a text incorporating both protest slogans and the language of a love letter, including quotes from Oscar Wilde’s love letter to Lord Alfred Douglas as well as chants from the gay liberation movement of the 1970s. The reading took place on the streets of Manhattan and knowledge of the setting added another layer to the dialogue between personal and political—in creating the

Above

Installation view of “Five Acts: Chronicles of Dissent”; photograph by Aaron Igler/Greenhouse Media

work, Hayes literally occupied a public space in a manner more generally associated with the protest elements in her piece, and yet used that platform to also address themes of love and betrayal typically kept to private realms. In so doing, she invited viewers to consider the boundaries between public and private, and the oft-repeated notion that the personal is political.

The final room in the gallery contained works by Bowers, Mohaiemen, and Tribe. Bowers's video, *Nonviolent Civil Disobedience Training—Tree Sitting Forest Defense* (2009), was displayed on a monitor mounted on a platform near the ceiling of the gallery. This device created a separate zone for the work, allowing the viewer to focus attention on it and to form an apt connection with the work's subject, which shows the artist receiving instruction about how to occupy a tree in protest of its pending destruction. We see Bowers as she somewhat timidly follows her instructor ever higher into the tree's branches, shot mostly from below in short, choppy segments. This filmic technique focuses the viewer's attention primarily on the physical act and challenge of Bowers's ascent, leaving consideration of the political meaning of her action to a secondary role. As with Hayes's installation, this technique foregrounds consideration of the personal even within the public space of demonstration or, in Bowers's case, occupation.

Mohaiemen, a Bangladeshi artist working in both Dhaka and New York, was represented in this show by two works: *Nayak (lost hero of history)* (2009) and *Live True Life or Die Trying* (2009). Of these, the latter was the more compelling and seemed to more closely coincide with the overall themes of the show. The twenty-one photographs, paired with text, show moments from two protest rallies staged in Dhaka on the same date in 2009: one by leftist adherents on the campus of the local university and the other in the public streets by a group of Islamists (the text does not include the word "radical" as a modifier, but it seems implied through the selection of images and texts). Despite the differences in political persuasion between the two groups, Mohaiemen's artist's statement noted that the rallies protest "[a]ll the same targets: Imperialism, United Nations, Multinationals." He then asks, "Is the difference now only in icons?"¹ This question seemed especially apt for the viewer who may not have initially understood that this series records actions by two very different groups; the immediate impression of all the photographs is that of the confusion and targeted rage inherent in any protest. In the same statement, Mohaiemen acknowledged that ". . . every time I photograph a protest rally, there are bits I'm leaving out."² In this case, those bits seem to be the identifying markers—at least those immediately identifiable to an outsider. In so doing, Mohaiemen makes a statement about the universality of real and perceived oppression and perhaps invites us to consider how the divisions between political factions may impede achievement of ultimate goals.

In the "Port Huron Project" (2006–09), rounding out the show with its prominent placement on the back wall of the gallery, Tribe presented a series of reenactments of significant protest

speeches from the Vietnam era. Activists such as Stokely Carmichael, Cesar Chavez, and Angela Davis are played by contemporary actors who read their words of protest against war and violence, and against political and economic oppression at home and abroad. This audio was provided through headsets rather than broadcast, enabling the viewer/listener to enter into a personal engagement with the work, free from the distractions of other audio in the gallery. The videos cut rapidly between shots of the actors framed against washed out, almost white backgrounds and of the speeches' audiences, a mixture of invited guests and random passersby, whose contemporary clothes belie any possible belief that one is viewing clips of the original events. Tribe's videos make the connection between themes of protest from the late 1960s and early '70s that are still resonant today, echoing the observation in Mohaiemen's photographs about the shared goals of seemingly opposed protest groups. Tribe also invites the viewer to consider the power of language and its role in protest, a theme that resonated also in Hayes's installation showcased in the previous gallery.

Although the five pieces selected by Amir initially seemed disparate in presentation and message, as the viewer spent time with the works and came to understand the stories behind them, the thematic undercurrents of the show became more pronounced and readily accessible. As Amir wrote in her curatorial statement, "Five Acts' features artists who communicate actions they have observed, thus straddling an uneasy space between immediate participation and a removed stance."³ Though the viewer is necessarily removed from the actions by an additional degree of separation, both the works and the curatorial decisions facilitated engagement with larger questions about the role of protest and activism in contemporary society and with the multiple means of demonstration and public political action available to both artists and activists.

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NOTES 1. Naeem Mohaiemen, Artist's Statement, "Live True Life or Die Trying," Naeem Mohaiemen, catalog of the exhibition at CUE Art Foundation, New York, 2009, www.cueartfoundation.org/naeem-mohaiemen.html. 2. Mohaiemen, Naeem Monhaemen, 4. 3. Yaelle Amir, Curator's Statement, "Five Acts: Chronicles of Dissent," catalog of the exhibition at Marginal Unity, Philadelphia, 2012, <http://yaelleamir.com/MU.html>.

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