

KAREN MIRZA AND BRAD BUTLER

Non Par-  
ticipation:  
Acts of  
Definition  
and Redef-  
inition

THE MUSEUM OF  
NON PARTICIPATION:  
THE NEW DEAL

WALKER ART CENTER

## THE MUSEUM OF NON PARTICIPATION:

This gallery guide is published by the Walker Art Center on the occasion of the exhibition *The Museum of Non Participation: The New Deal* (April 18–July 14, 2013), organized by the Walker and curated by Yesomi Umolu with Susannah Bielak.

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What does it mean to name and define not only a body of work, but a political or philosophical position, an artistic practice, or relationship to a wider social context? These are questions propelling *The Museum of Non Participation*. Through the very act of naming and identifying their project under the concept of “nonparticipation,” Mirza and Butler activate a collective process of inquiry around this inherently malleable and expansive term.

For the artists, what remains constant is that it speaks to urgent social conditions and pervasive everyday realities. As they describe it, “one aspect of nonparticipation is to acknowledge that it is a life condition, both consciously and unconsciously exercised in each of our lives. Internationally it exists in the excess of one’s own society, which is often gained at the expense of another’s nameless plight elsewhere. Locally it is recognizable when, for example, people encounter an issue that they believe is valid or necessary—say, homelessness, the right to protest, the Iraq War, but in that simultaneous moment they ignore it or reject it.”

As nonparticipation surfaces in our daily lives, Mirza and Butler assert that rather than being a position of negation or denial, it is a position from which to speak. By inviting multiple voices to address “non participation”—within the context of personal and professional lives or thinking on the convergences of art and political praxis—we aim to bring the expansive spirit of Mirza and Butler’s practice into literal acts of definition. In these texts written by a group of international and local collaborators, nonparticipation is understood variously in relationship to large-scale global migration and climate change, post-conflict situations, endemics of violence, daily habits, agency and identification as a citizen, social welfare, and resistance and revolution.

We extend an invitation to you to take on nonparticipation in your own terms.

Yesomi Umolu and Susannah Bielak,  
Walker Art Center

# What Does It Mean to Not Participate?

by Chris Conry

Let's start with what "nonparticipation" is not. It is not apathy, protest, or renunciation. Nonpartic- ↗

icipation works something like the quantum mechanical concept of the observer effect: to observe a particle is to change it. Nonparticipation is an unstable state that requires consciousness to be observed, but is instantly transformed by that same observation. It starts with pain. Once aware of our nonparticipation, we tell ourselves stories: "I never wanted to be part of that crew." "The

two-party system is inherently flawed." "I'm the black sheep of this family." You know there is a thing and you know you ain't part of it.

Nonparticipation, in another way, is akin to the concept of quantum superposition: a particle exists simultaneously in multiple physical states until it's observed and gets measured as ice, water, or steam. Nonparticipation is not-yet-participating. During the pain, we have a choice. What is the meaning of our not being an active part of something? Who are we, if we're not that?

The craft of politics is the self-serving story. I can tell you what it means that the unemployment rate is up, the Dow Jones is down, or the election is too close to call. I can tell you a story to help you be part of (or not part of) some particular set of facts. Nonparticipation, then, is the space where we get to engineer a new story that tangles with, co-opts, or succumbs to the thing we are already re/joining anyhow.

So, if there is a choice to be made, how do we make it?

Once-trusted givers of order are increasingly viewed as unre-

sponsive and self-serving. The US Congress, the church, and the financial system are experiencing crises of legitimacy. People view them as impenetrable or foreign, with power based in history, but ill-suited to our present needs. In response, people are innovating with political forms that are decentralized and democratic: online networks, occupations, and lending circles that are open-ended, personalized, and temporary. These two entities—established institutions and self-organizing people—pose competing claims for legitimacy: one based in authority, the other in authenticity.

So here we are in a museum—excuse me, an art center—that is temporarily hosting a “museum” that is itself not a building, but a multilayered project, including a play by Bertolt Brecht and a reflection on the New Deal. Step outside. In Minnesota we are, in fact, renegotiating the New Deal. Can we afford Medicare? Should we cut Social Security? Should we expand Medicaid? Can we save the New Deal? Do we need a new New Deal? Who’s party to that deal? Should we include immigrants? Should corporations pay? Is working hard and playing by the rules going to get you ahead?

Visiting *The Museum of Non Participation*, I am reminded that with the pain of alienation, there is freedom. I’m a voter. I’m Lutheran. I have a mortgage. I’m simultaneously a participant and critic of our institutional authorities. As the exceptions to their rule grow more numerous, I have a choice: to plunder what’s left before it is gone or to repurpose and reauthorize what remains.

# Notes on Nonparticipation and an Entangled Earth

by Nabil Ahmed

In 1990, the first assessment report of the UN Intergov- ↗

ernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated that large-scale global migration due to climate change is the “greatest single impact” on world security. The climate is increasingly acting as a trigger to future conflicts around not only resources but also over migration at an unprecedented scale. A new contested term has entered the political imaginary through an environmental sensibility: climate refugees. The people of the mega deltas and the Island States in the South Pacific, Indian Ocean, or in the Caribbean—Tuvalu, Nauru, Kiribati, Vanuatu, Maldives, or the Bahamas—face a radical future with the rising oceans and the loss of their state.

Statelessness is in itself not a new concept. Historically, however, it is embedded in either multistate systems or it forms part of a complex national identity, geopolitically present through separatist movements that result in actions ranging from negotiating representation to guerrilla wars. Climate change will produce a completely new definition of stateless population where geographic territory submerges, redefining the very terms of politics that shake the foundations of a political philosophy understood by Carl Schmitt as an epic battle between the land and the sea. Can a state still exist without territory under international law? And what will be the rights of the people? The global north wants to protect a pristine nature that no longer exists, but at the same time use national immigration laws designed as deterrents and as instruments of antagonism, animosity, and violence on the human body.

Nonparticipation might be one way to understand this disparity between the global north and the global south. The first is responsible for the majority of the world’s carbon emissions and extractivist fetishism, while the second pays the price through their historical nonparticipation in the global economy and epistemologies of the north. But I argue it is precisely in their nonparticipation that space for politics in the global south has opened up. The people of the global south share nonparticipation with nature after centuries of domination. In politics after nature in the Anthropocene—the geological epoch coproduced by humans that resonates the deep time of the planet—the global south and nature come to the table for a proposed contract between Earth and its inhabitants, poised between a gesture and a protocol.

# 12.18 (Untitled)

by Keli Garrett

While I wrote this I kept thinking, *I guess it is okay that every day approximately thirty-three people die from gun violence. That our violence is quotidian, expected, anticipated,* ↗

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*and therefore our sacrament.* That when seven women and twenty-six seven-year-olds are shot up, missing limbs and chins and fingers, life will go on here as usual. The NRA guys will get together and buy T-shirts with guns on them, renew their memberships, and assemble to heckle the grieving parents and families of the victims. Surely, I thought, the rest of us shouldn't be condemned to sharing the same sky with such people. *Really?* I thought. *Yes, really,* was the answer.

I

At any point  
when  
the violence  
has been  
too hard  
to bear

I've checked out  
And

checked in  
to video  
moving picture,  
word streams  
of aimless,  
narcissistic rambling  
and have opted in  
to commune  
with the solipsistic  
who center  
themselves because  
really, what else is there to see?

Potholes and fractures  
don't exist

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except in  
the movies played by  
James Cagney and Matt Damon,  
and, really, what else is there? besides those  
or the two by two  
copy cats  
that follow the  
same smack  
injected into the arms of  
nameless cats  
Black,  
who having no recourse but to play

the words as they are written

happily ingest the poison,  
the stuff of which  
their dreams will be made,  
not of Kubla Kahn  
but of  
never.

II

In a matter of moments

We were galvanized.

Some ranted  
Some ran

We drank instead and  
Closed our thoughts  
No more dark things

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We instead  
Dared dream

Nightmares can be forgotten

Deluded  
We are what we think

Thanked our lucky stars

*On est a l'abri nulle part*

That we live in a place  
Where one can  
Shop all day and night

And that food is copious and plentiful

Plenty

We decided instead  
To eat too much

*Living the Dream*

Devouring our distresses

Anything not to peer into oneself  
An abyss without and within

Our holes are vast though,  
And nothing will fill them

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# The New New Deal in Art and Politics

by Larne Abse Gogarty

Private and public  
galleries and institu-  
tions are often op-  
posed within con-  
temporary art ↗



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criticism and discourse with public equated with good, ethical practice, and private equated with corporate baddies. This is problematic insofar as very few, if any, “public” institutions are entirely one or the other. Instead, due to declining public funds for the arts, most work on a mixed income of private and public money. However, in relation to the question of the New Deal and nonparticipation, I want to suggest that this dichotomy also fails to think critically about the relationship between art and the state.

In 1940, the Walker Art Center reopened as part of the Work Projects Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project within their Community Art Centers division. Along with hosting special exhibitions and the private collection of T. B. Walker, it began to run art classes and mount ventures relating to the local community. The WPA Federal Art Project was a huge relief program for unemployed artists and ran alongside others within “Federal One” such as the Federal Theatre, Music, and Writers Projects.

These WPA programs positioned cultural workers as useful members of society, not romantics locked away in garrets. Art, theater, literature, and music sponsored by the New Deal therefore had to straddle the divide between being “socially useful” and aesthetically interesting; quantifiers that were arbitrated by the New Deal administration as well as art critics, institutions, and audiences. Artists engaged in participatory, politicized, and social practice today are often said to face similar challenges in having to face up to “ethical” as well as aesthetic criteria.

Many of the cultural workers employed by the WPA had leftist sympathies, particularly those employed by the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). Famously, director Hallie Flanagan was asked to testify in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1938 and defend the “communistic” tendencies within the plays supported by the FTP. It closed shortly after, largely due to these accusations.

However, those who created works with “communistic” sympathies felt they were indeed being “socially useful”—and that in order to be at all aesthetically interesting, the arts needed to engender forms of resistance to capitalism. This raises the question: socially

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useful and aesthetically interesting for whom? And how?

When contemporary art discourse derides social practice as instrumentalized, this is because artists are assumed to be doing the job of the state that contributes funding to their creation. What is missing from this debate is a discussion of politics, and intention on behalf of the artist(s). In placing *The Museum of Non Participation*

in conversation with the idea of the New Deal, we get an image of a political order that creates a terrain for conflict, renewal, and a questioning of the relations between state and citizen within the arts. It raises the possibility of the social within artworks as something to be politicized quite explicitly, in a mode that is not didactic but instead capable of prompting a dialectical process for the viewer. All good art is involved with the social. What needs to be asked is what is the “good” in this equation—and thus, where do your politics lie?

# (Non) Participa- tion

by Olga Gonzalez

There is an apparent absence of presence that suggests indifference or maybe worse, collusion and complicity. In Peru, ↗

(non) participation in the form of ignorance and prejudice has contributed to a “culture of impunity” despite the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) recommendations toward the pursuit of justice. In 2003 when Salomón Lerner, the chairman of the TRC, handed in the final report to President Alejandro Toledo, he said it “contains a double outrage: that of massive murder, disappearance and torture; and that of indolence, incompetence and indifference of those who could have stopped this humanitarian catastrophe but didn’t.”

In the aftermath of violence, “I didn’t know” emerged as a common phrase, particularly among upper- and middle-class citizens in Lima. It seems ludicrous to think that the estimated 70,000 victims during the 20-year-long internal armed conflict would have come as a shocking surprise to Peruvian society. The truth is that everybody knew but not everybody cared about the fate of indigenous Andean people who had become main targets in the war. With their identities conveniently conflated with terrorism, indigenous people were perceived as the enemy. Framed as such, they became what Judith Butler calls “ungrievable lives.” This is the inconvenient truth that everybody knows but pretends not to know. Silence and denial then. Denial and silence today. The absence of justice, always. And we all know it!

In “post-conflict” Peru, symbolic reparations in the form of public apologies, memorials, and museums create the illusion of a nation coming to terms, as does the paradigmatic “Never Again.” To remember is not for all. In Peru, differences between political and ethnic factions are pushed to clear delineation. For economic and political elites who justify the military violence as unfortunate but necessary “excesses of war,” to forget is the only path to reconciliation. For the Quechua-speaking peasants, to erase the traces of any sympathy they could have had with the Shining Path guerrillas, particularly at the beginning of the war, is the only path to become “the innocent victim” entitled to adequate economic reparation. These tensions with memory are reflected in the country’s “sites of memory.” The critical visitor to these places might notice

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the silences, so tangible in their own invisibility, and attempt to denounce and create the missing stories. In other cases, the visitor's absence condemns the site to oblivion, making (non) participation a powerful means to question a memorial or museum's failure to challenge the status quo. We forget that to build does not always mean to construct!

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# The Journey

by Rahila Gupta

Perhaps nonparticipation should not be written off.

When it is unconscious, it is not worth remarking upon because we do not even know ↗

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what it is in which we have not participated.

Postmodernism presents nonparticipation as an acceptable, alternate reality and deems the political impulse to change it invalid because that would reintroduce the binary idea of right and wrong.

Nonparticipation, however, might be an act of resistance.

If it is actively chosen because the activity that seeks your participation needs to be critiqued, then nonparticipation or noncooperation becomes a critique (compare with the teachings of Gandhi).

But to make the resistance visible and concrete, steps will have to be taken, and in that process nonparticipation will mutate into something other, its alter ego.

It has been my life's work as a writer and activist, using every political and artistic strategy, to shift resistance and noncommitment from inaction to action.

Whether it is working with women escaping violence, fighting for the right of disabled children to be embraced by the mainstream, standing up against racism or religious fundamentalism, or treading a careful line between the competing claims of race, gender, and class.

So that it becomes an addiction.

So that it becomes as inevitable as drawing breath.

So that you feel the vibrating energy of a group of people embarking on a joint project.

My artistic endeavor is about setting up a honey trap, snagging your emotions, drawing you in, inviting identification, empathy, analysis—all this embedding a call to action.

But to be true to itself, the artistic impulse cannot live in black and white. It must heighten color, muddy the waters; it must tear at the soul with an irreconcilable sense of contradiction; it must take you to the edge of the cliff. You must experience the breathlessness of falling before it draws you back and allows you the sensation of relief.

You walk unsuspecting into the easy rhythm of a ballad, the embrace of a soap opera, the snare of a thriller.

That part of the journey must not be difficult.

I surrender experiment with form, language, and genre.

It is when you have been lured in that the difficult questions will

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be posed. It is then that I stand to lose my newly won audience. Will you stick with me through the rest of the journey? Will you heed the call to action? Will you resist this relationship that appears to be based on a denial of agency? Or will the attempt to live up to its standards serve the artistic impulse but strangle the political will?

And when all of that has been bridged and you, as one in a hundred, have made the leap of faith, you must face the imperatives of the political—the contradictions between the quest for numbers and the quality of the participation, the insistence on the right political analysis and the right language.

We argue about language because it embeds attitudes, and yet when language changes to signify a break with the past, the landscape of prejudice often doesn't change but rather ambushes new words with old ideas.

You walk into this purer-than-pure ideological space of the museum, newly enthused by your brush with art, and feel confused.

The activist needs to understand your journey and needs to learn to embrace you.

# (Non) / 0

by Fatos Ustek

All prefixes are derivational and they provide lexical meaning. The prefix “non” is twofold, standing both for absence and negation. It suffices to show that what has

been is no longer there or is not as it used to be. It might indicate a loss, a condition of without and/or amplify the states of lacking. Zero is both a number and the numerical digit used to represent that number in numerals. It has a function in the numeric system and fulfills a central role in mathematics as the additive identity of integers, real numbers, and many other algebraic structures. Zero is also a conceptual image sharing the qualities of “non,” furthering the concept of nothingness. Zero negates and “non” is the counter-positive of something in existence.

The arithmetic operations of addition, subtraction, and multiplication are processes that change an existing value by the force of another number. In applied mathematics, when zero is added to or subtracted from another number, it does not cause a change in the numeric value of that number. But when that number is placed in a multiplication relationship with zero, it loses its numeric value. Division is a function that seeks to break up an entity through a denominator. A complication arises in the process of division when the dividend is zero. The result is no longer definable as it attains multiple values simultaneously, hence is assigned NaN (not a number). Both multiplication and division are processes that can activate a major differentiation in value. As with relationships at large, in mathematics a singular value is always the result of multiple couplings and can be derived by multiple means. That is, the outcome of the two values—introduced to one another at a specific gravity-entropy constellation—might be reached by other relations under variant circumstances. A basic example: 60 is an outcome of 2 and 30, also an outcome of 2 and 120, 5 and 12, and so on. Hence the specificity of the mathematical operation is of great significance, especially when complicated formations and values are at hand (i.e., museum and non, museum and participation, non and participation, and so on).

# When This Thread Snaps

by Rachel Anderson

The revolution won't be led by red flags and the sound of "Bella Ciao"; it won't be written about by approved academics ↗

whose careers we've followed and trusted; it won't elevate the voices of those we long to hear more of, who affirm us and raise our spirits; it won't fill our airwaves or our ears with solidarity and the justice for which we stand. It won't happen between respectable hours and in designated areas, and it won't have an allocated tea station, information board, or "quiet zone." There will be no training and organized occupations, no sign-up speaking platforms, no "burn out" support group, no PA system fueled by pedal power, no press photos, no high-visibility vests, no polite unauthoritative signage.

It will come like a flood in the night, with boundless power and uncatchable form, with inconsistency and unpredictability; it will speak with an invisible voice in a language we won't understand because we never listened before. It will not see us, and it won't obey our rational demands or follow the path we prepared for it. It will swell and burst. It will be appalling, misplaced, and reckless. It will prioritize the wrong values, it will dance to the wrong songs and laugh in the wrong places; it will be unreasonable, it will be angry, it will be untamable; it won't understand that we are the good ones who devoted our lives to this time. We will be left with no choice but to join our old enemies in order to put an end to all this, because we have real work to do and a revolution to prepare for.

Note:

Last year I went to a socialist film festival to see a documentary about the 2011 London riots called *Wonderland: My Child the Rioter*, which presented interviews with young people who were involved in these riots and their parents. There was a panel discussion afterward with a working-class family from the north of England who appeared in the film. The young boy was politicized, angry, and radical; he was a very compelling speaker. I think he was studying politics. The first in his family to go to university, he positioned himself as somewhere between anti-capitalist and Marxist. A woman sitting behind me made a comment during the Q&A that went something like this: "You're a really bright, articulate young man and I want to congratulate you, but most of those who joined the riots last year weren't being political."

The riots took place in August 2011 across London and other cities in the UK. They began after the police shot and killed 29-year-old Mark Dugan in North London. Hundreds of thousands of young people took to the streets and thousands were arrested and given severe prison sentences; five people died. Because of the extensive looting that took place during the riots, the mainstream voice of the media and public undermines these actions as not being "political."

# What Would Socrates Say?

by Jeanne Dorado

What do I have in  
common with Jesus,  
Rosa Parks, George  
Washington, Fidel  
Castro, and a ↗

Quaker? Mavericks or misfits, we offer our communities alternative paths to follow and infinite ideas to be considered outside of perceived respective norms. While we look like anyone else within our species, the whole is greater than the sum of our parts. We live non-participation fiercely, demonstrating leadership and perseverance while going against the grain. We ask tough questions, rock boats, and challenge paradigms collectively.

You want in? Here's how:

1. **By Discussing World History:** Beauty, like history, lies in the eye of the beholder. Globalization has ensured that it's now easier than ever to discover alternative mainstreams, occurrences, and perspectives. Experience is like a prism with many angles from which comes color and light. The shade of the Mankato Massacre of 1862 moved Minnesota forward as an immigrant state, while simultaneously moving us backwards in morality. The experience of bullying started long before the Internet. So how do we define progress? Can progress be Cuba's coastal conservation or is progress developing resort Rivas?
2. **By Asking More Questions:** Born in the 1980s, I was raised to think I was unique and irreplaceable. While I appreciate the sentiment, if I'm not a retail sales goal, I'm a credit goal, or it's networking, advertising, unique visits. Return on investment. You're quantifiable in the eyes of a ledger. Numbers are like origami—you can shape a statistic into almost any form and it will skew up (or down) into a life of its own. Origami is two-dimensional, like the sheet of paper you hold now—turning you into the passive subject being dazzled and deceived into responding to a prescribed need for planned obsolescence and mind-numbing consumption. Carry on. Corporatocracy has all the answers. But what is the meaning behind this, and at what and whose cost?

3. **By Being Paranoid:** Don't look now, but someone *is* out to get you. There's no composite facial sketch, but by taking an observant look to count the logos, brands, and hype you confront daily, you should start to get the right idea.
4. **By Living the Difference:** Don't let habit get the best of you. Innovate and evolve, human! The legend of Jesus is that of ultimate nonparticipation. He said, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor ... and come, follow me." (Mark 10:21) The one *thing* that I'm lacking is *no things* at all? A profound shift, indeed. Prescribed common sense dictates otherwise, but it is possible to survive without 4G or NYSE—much of the world does this every day.

Why bother?

I'd like to secure a healthy blue dot for the exquisite children that shimmer among us, that they might be assured a life-sustaining planet, shaved ice, and the iridescence of soap bubbles. What could possibly be more important?

Sincerely, nonparticipation is necessary to save ourselves from ourselves. I'm leading the parade and fucking for peace.\* Now who's with me?

\* By consent and signed waiver only.



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