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Refusal

Wood Land School—Lido Pimienta
Lutz Bacher—Joshua Vettivelu—John Edmonds
Art After Property—#callresponse—Killjoy
Le Grand Balcon: BNLM TL 2016—Divya Mehra
Jean-Paul Kelly—Patrick Cruz—Etel Adnan

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When We Are Welcomed Into The Fold, Where Do We Keep What Is Left Behind?

by Joshua Vettivelu

This idea of refusal has been writhing around in my head since the first time I was tricked into being curated into a show “about diaspora” – a reductive curatorial framework that has plagued South Asian artists since the birth of ’90s identity politics. I was uncomfortable with the lazy curation and exploitative artist fee but, being fresh out of undergrad, I felt compelled to “take an opportunity.” I largely regret the time, resources and energy I put into my participation in that show, but ultimately it was a nice line on my CV that helped legitimize my efforts to continue being an artist.

A year later, in 2014, the collective HOWDOYOUSAY-YAMINAFRICAN? publicly withdrew their participation from the Whitney Biennial. The next year, the entire first-year MFA cohort at the University of Southern California dropped out to protest reduced tuition subsidies.¹ In 2016, Black Lives Matter Toronto halted the Toronto Pride Parade until their demands were met. Now, in 2017, singer Rebecca Ferguson agrees to sing at Trump’s inauguration dinner under the sole condition that she sing Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” a song that recounts the lynching of black bodies swinging from trees.

For me, refusal has always come with a complicated relationship between desire, ego and recognition. The ego tries to appease desire in a way that is socially and materially realistic, and recognition gives you a way to imagine yourself being in the world. When faced with precarity, outright refusal is not always an option for everyone. However, the reality of precarity is often overlooked when artists are forced to make ethically uneasy decisions about when to accept money and opportunity. The accusation of “selling out” seems deeply invested in upholding artists to a utopian politic of liberal purity that

disregards sustainability; it is a fantasy that absolves the accuser of the reality that, under capitalism, we are all always selling pieces of ourselves.

As the Canada Council for the Arts unveils its New Chapter Grant, we are seeing a flurry of arts organizations apply for this funding. It is a funding opportunity that joyfully commemorates 150 years of continued violence against Canada’s First Nations populations, while offering extraordinary sums of money rarely seen in arts funding. From a settler perspective, is the course of action to refuse outright this opportunity that could otherwise revitalize a sector? Or does it present an opportunity (read: obligation) for organizations to redistribute state funds they do receive and build stronger relationships with Indigenous arts workers and organizations? There is no clear-cut answer, but it makes it very clear that refusing large sums of money when you have very little is often a tricky negotiation of how to participate in the world.

In May 2016, as part of my then-newly appointed position as Director of Programming at Whippersnapper Gallery, I helped organize and moderate a discussion titled *Damned If You Do: A Conversation on the Politics of Refusal* featuring artists Deanna Bowen and Abbas Akhavan. The idea was to have two established artists speak to Whippersnapper’s emerging artist audience about navigating neoliberal art systems. The framework behind the panel was generated through our PEERS group, composed of five brilliant emerging artists of colour: Maandeeq Mohamed, Brian Joe, Rekha Ramachandran, Sean Sandusky and Zinnia Naqvi. We boiled down the framework to three questions: How do you refuse? What if they don’t let you refuse? And what if you don’t want to refuse?

Deanna opened the conversation by making the amendment that her practice was one that doesn't necessarily revolve around refusal, but rather strategic affirmation:

My work is about honouring my family and their history. The times that refusal comes into the equation is when I go into institutions and I experience this need for me to perform in a very particular way – it largely arises from institutional desires for pain-porn: black bodies that have been brutalized, specific to civil rights and slave history. My family history is obviously rooted in all those things, but I don't honour that impulse. Instead I go the route of affirming what I understand of my family, which is that they have been wonderfully resilient and courageous over the generations.

This sentiment of negotiating/refusing institutional desires was echoed by Abbas who saw inclusion as “hospitality that can become ambivalent. It's whether or not when you're invited into a space being understood for who you are or [whether you are] serving as a placeholder.”

The institutions from which we seek recognition also have their own desires that limit their ability to fully accommodate the politics of artists whose subjecthood cannot escape politicization. The burden that artists (who are not afforded the neutrality of whiteness or maleness) carry is that their work can be mobilized by institutions to prop up a facade of diversity that distracts from the systemic violence that is foundational to their structure. As Abbas explains, navigating this is:

[A] negotiation of how much contradiction you can live with as an artist and how much of letting your work go is part of its production [...] There's this obligation to be an exception in a system that you are essentially negotiating with and not capable of fully rejecting or having a constant fight with.

Around the same time as *Damned If You Do*, I was invited by the Art Gallery of York University to collaborate with student groups to create a float for the Toronto Pride Parade. Not to be too opaque with my politics, but I have always disregarded Pride as the pursuit of apolitical neoliberal pleasure; an event that is symptomatic of the ways we are seduced into forgetting our political origins. The students I worked with were also very cognizant of the inherent contradictions and exclusions Pride contained, especially as the 2016 Pride theme was “You can sit with us” (a play on the quotable “you can't sit with us” line from the 2004 film *Mean Girls*) – a suspicious invitation if there ever was one.

When we are asked to leave our table and come sit at another, who is left behind? It became apparent to me that if I was to participate in Pride, it would be to reveal that the terms of inclusion were, in fact, not inclusive, that the happiness narrative that Pride offered was not extended to everyone. So I used the form of an undecorated float to bear the words:

HOW FOOLISH IT FEELS / TO TAKE THESE
STEPS / THINKING YOU'D PROTECT US.
- A MESSAGE TO THOSE
AT THE TOPS OF TOWERS.

The float was accompanied by T-shirts that read:

THE FARTHER YOU ARE FROM THE GROUND,
THE HARDER IT IS TO FEEL A HEART STOP
BEATING.

I see these negotiations of inescapable contradictions running parallel to queer theorist José Muñoz's theory of disidentification, a strategy of identification and survival for those who are caught up in an ideology that they can neither fully reject nor assimilate into but rather,

...tactically and simultaneously work on, with, and against, a cultural form. [...] Disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.²

I see disidentification as a way of participating that holds space for both intentional refusal and acceptance. It was utilized brilliantly in May 2014 when HDYSYIA? pulled out of the Whitney Biennial. In an interview with Ben Davis for Artnet, collective member Christa Bell said that, “One of the ways that we have discussed framing our participation – even before it started – was as a protest. Our participation inside of this white supremacist institution is a protest in itself. Of course we were aware of the politics of exclusion, the politics of white supremacy that make up the institution of the Whitney. I think a great way to consider this is that the entire participation was a protest, and the withdrawal was part of the protest.” To which collective member Sienna Shields added: “Exactly. Saying ‘yes’ was the first step to protest.”³

To me, this withdrawal was a part of their installation: a performance of refusal as concrete and valid as any material sculpture. To accept and then publicly withdraw had a larger impact than any singular art piece could have had because it drew attention to the ways in which a structure like the Whitney cannot be neutral and is thus unable to accommodate the work/politics of a collective of black artists. Their action highlights the fact that refusal is not always a dichotomous reaction, but rather a series of negotiations that can reveal invisible structures.

However, this strategy is not without risk. The reality is that showing at institutions like the Whitney and Guggenheim places artists in a strata of visibility that allows for a different kind of leveraging to occur. It would be naïve of me to suggest that the strategies listed above are viable for everyone. The risk of providing a critique of inclusion, even when solicited, is that eventually opportunities dry up when your critiques become demands. We want critical artists ready to take risks, but only so far as those risks are discursively exploitable and not asking too much.

During the panel, Abbas briefly mentioned that, “there is a certain nutritional value in neglect” and the sentiment felt familiar to me. I have often felt that the starting stages of my career, when there were no eyes on me, was when I was able to experiment and make mistakes with few repercussions. In retrospect, I realize that during this period I may have been invisible to the institutions from which I sought recognition, but I was far from being neglected. Instead, I was being fostered by a community that understood my intentions – and this was an incredibly fertile source of recognition.

Because of this, I often feel like I am standing on the shoulders of giants, trying to focus my eyes to avoid vertigo. I wonder if the strategy of balance is to realign where we desire recognition from and interrogate if these higher

places are nourishing us and if our access to them allows us to nourish those around us. A sentiment Deanna shares:

[I'm trying to] figure out how to work around the sense of singularity by including as many people of colour onto my party parade, as much as possible, with the understanding that whatever it is that I'm achieving is really important to share with other people. I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing if it wasn't for the people in this world who have kept me afloat and told me what I was doing was important. So yes, I'm singular but I'm also very much part of a community of people who think very much like I do – and we all benefit from whatever it is I'm experiencing right now. And I hope that whatever I am doing will open some doors for the collective.

I think there is a way that we – those of us who are afforded the agency to do so – can neglect the institutions that need our critiques, our work and our energy and re-focus our attention back into the communities that allowed us to have a platform in the first place.

When we climb to a higher strata, where the air is thin, will we have enough breath left in us to pull another up?

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Endnotes

- 1 "Entire First-Year MFA Class Drops Out in Protest at the University of Southern California", in *hyperallergic.com*; <http://hyperallergic.com/207235/entire-first-year-mfa-class-drops-out-in-protest-at-the-university-of-southern-california/>
- 2 José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- 3 "The Yams, on the Whitney and White Supremacy", in *artnet.com*; <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/the-yams-on-the-whitney-and-white-supremacy-30364>

Josh Vettivelu, *How Foolish – Mockup for Pride Float*, 2016.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

