

# THE LONGING FOR A TOTAL

Naeem Mohaiemen

Three metal girders come together to form a triangle. Halfway down is a perpendicular piece, drawing the midline. A woman is standing on this, holding on to a beam. The shirtless man in the next quadrant seems more relaxed, but look closely and you can see his elbow leaning against another beam. Supported nonchalance—free of balance concerns, the right hand is raised, middle finger firmly stuck out at the camera.

The photo was printed as a full-page advertisement in *Art Forum*, announcing Mark di Suvero's 2011 show at Paula Cooper gallery. Later, I learned the woman was Paula Cooper, circa 1965 in a Greenpoint studio in New York. The man, of course, was di Suvero.

I have been thinking of these modes of performative rebellion, and the contrasting, quotidian details of daily resistance.

Around the time the ad came out, the Arts & Culture committee of *Occupy Wall Street* published an open letter to di Suvero, asking him to make a statement condemning the police barricading to “protect” his statue, and the related barricading of all of Zuccotti Park. In a gesture of politesse that was produced by our internal deliberations, the letter stated: “We are conscious

of your role in the creation of the Peace Tower (1966 and 2006), and your public opposition to the wars in Vietnam and Iraq.”

We made the letter public via media, and the sculptor's office was privately contacted by Nato Thompson, Paul Chan, and several others. Two months passed; di Suvero never responded to the letter or the outreach. Instead, the Metropolitan Museum of Art replied to another portion of the letter:



Mark di Suvero ad, *ArtForum* c. 1965. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery

the attached photos, which included one of a barricade with the Met's logo attached. In a press comment, a museum representative explained: "It's accurate to say that the Metropolitan Museum was unaware that the barricade labeled with the Met's name was being used there. After checking around, it seems that the barricade must have been picked up accidentally from outside the museum with other, unlabeled barricades after a City event (perhaps a parade) and then transferred to the park."

A few weeks later, Los Angeles based nonprofit space LA><ART announced that di Suvero was recreating his 1960s *Peace Tower* (also recreated once before for the Whitney Biennial): "The Artists' Tower of Protest will be re-staged in 2012 as a way to reflect on this important historical moment in Los Angeles and to open a dialogue about the role of arts activism today. We invite artists to join us in the construction of the Artists' Tower of Protest by making a panel to express your individual dissent."

I read this announcement and wondered why di Suvero was seemingly at ease only with recreations of bygone dissent. Why not engage with immediate movements, where his cultural capital could be of use to younger artists and activists? The cynics muttered that it was because he was married to Kate Levin, Mayor Bloomberg's commissioner of cultural affairs. But surely, that is even more reason to take a clear stance— in favor of a universal right to the commons, against barricades and militarization?

Perhaps something else is going on.

There are people who are galvanized by the many movements of recent years and jump into the fray. Sometimes with forethought, sometimes without too much of it— the latter is truer to energies that are instinctive and from the gut, not tactical and cautious. There are others who observe and wait, to see what will come "next." *They wait for things to marinate. Too soon to tell, really. Just wait a minute, will you wait...?*

Some people are held back by the worry that the movements we encounter with accelerating speed are not transformative moments, and therefore not "worth" being swept away by. Bernard Yack formulates the "longing for total revolution"<sup>1</sup> as something that will remain philosophically incoherent and practically unimplemented as long as it manifests only through the process of political upheaval. What is needed, as per Yack, is a "complete transformation of the spirit of individuals and social institutions, which political revolution fails to achieve."

Consider the warning signs of a few years back. When Iran's green revolution broke, many of us were transfixed and instantly involved. In Dhaka, our group mounted a graffiti action on the walls of the Iranian Cultural Center (an unguarded, underutilized relic in the Dhanmondi part of town). A few days later, on the Dhaka University campus, protesters were countered by arguments from those who thought this would come to nothing.

*[in Bengali]*

*What is Moussavi anyway, he is for the continuation of clerical power!*

*No, if that were so, all those women would not come out on the streets for him.*

*How do we know how many women have come out for him?*

*How do you know how many have not?*

*I know what I read on the Internet!*

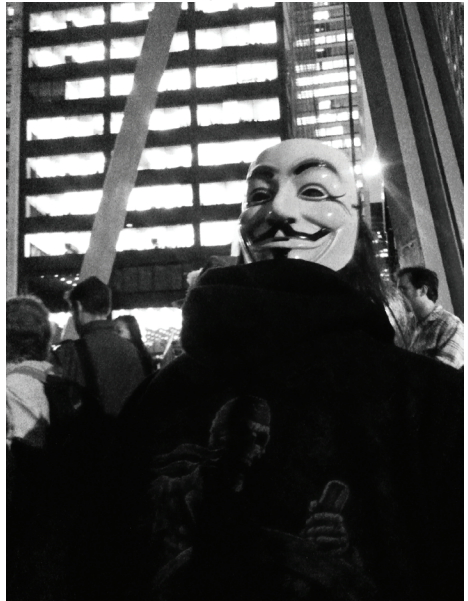
*So do I.*

*What about the announcement that Chavez made?*

*Hell with your Chavez!*

We were never able to determine whether the green revolution was to be a decisive break or incremental change within the same system. In contrast, Egypt has already produced a reversal of imagined scripts within nine months. The army is not letting go of power, and election victors are not those who gave the energy to Tahrir Square. We are left wondering about the gap between rapid movement upsurges and systemic electoral politics.

Throughout this whole period, microphones were urgently thrust into faces: tell us what you think. No one has time to process; the movement has to be reduced to its meaning.

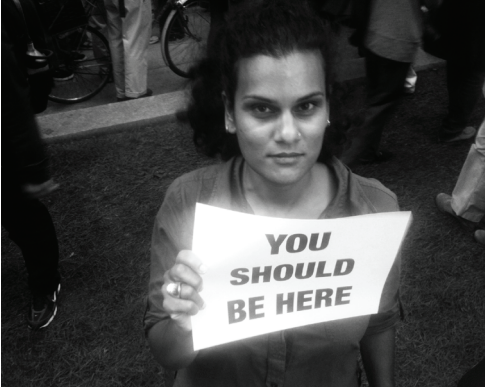


Naeem Mohaiemen, Day 40. Courtesy the artist

Given the flood of iconic images of movement politics over the last twelve months, I wonder why I have never seen an image of Mohamed Bouazizi setting himself on fire. There is one grainy photo of a man shrouded in flames, sometimes juxtaposed with his family photo, but the labeling is never clear. Maybe that image is Bouazizi, but I wonder why I need clear signposting. What am I looking for?

Writing about the 1968 siege of Chicago, Norman Mailer reflected that it was not only a matter of the whole world watching (a slogan appropriated many times over the last few months—overuse has blunted its impact). It was also that the state had decided **not** to carry out these actions in dark alleys, or inside a paddy wagon. There was a desire to play out the entire script in open air. Because there were other eyes watching as well—ones that saw events not as protests met with brutality, but as proof that the left was running amok.

And now? A motorcycle runs over a foot, and there is an instant thicket of lenses all around. The moment is captured so many times, many of us put our cameras away. It reminds me of that moment in 2004, while we were



Naeem Mohaiemen, Day 19. Courtesy the artist

filming a documentary on the *World Social Forum* in Bombay: running behind a truck trying to capture the protesters inside, and then noticing the Japanese film crew who had managed to secure a privileged, tripod-assisted position inside the truck. *Oh. We are not needed here.*

People feel they “know” what is happening in Egypt, Libya,

Syria, Nigeria, and elsewhere because there are always copious amounts of footage and photographs. The speed at which images are transmitted has been the greatest strength of these movements. But therein also lies the weakness: how long can people keep their attention on one event, when so many other events are competing for mind space?

In 1972, one prong of Nixon’s re-election strategy was to appeal to the “working man” against the supposedly spoiled, sybaritic, out-of-control children of Aquarius. The hard-hat riots sent a signal: flower power was some nonsense for children who refused to get a decent job (rechanneled in the 2011 tabloid war against Occupy). When we meet the antihero (or the blue hat real hero) of the 1970 film *Joe*,<sup>2</sup> he is on a tirade against a country gone too far (sounding like a precursor to Gingrich): “The n\*\*\*\*\*s, the n\*\*\*\*\*s are gettin’ all da money. Why work, tell me, why the fuck work, when you can screw, have babies, an’ get paid for it?”

Gentle, soft-spoken (and very tall), Peter Boyle landed his first starring role as this hardhat avenger. The film, made on a budget of \$106,000, went on to gross an unprecedented \$19 million at the US box office. Boyle was shocked when audiences started cheering his character at screenings, and even more so when railroad worker Arville Garland murdered his own daughter and three others in Detroit, in a ghastly, real-life recreation of the film’s climax. The horrified actor subsequently rejected the lead role in the *French Connection*, and refused to act in any more ultraviolent films. It is not quite in the same vein, but I think of Boyle when I read about the police chief who supervised the crackdown on the Seattle WTO protests, but later become an impassioned speaker against excessive policing.<sup>3</sup>

Call and response: “We are ... the 99%,” and after a small pause, hands beckoning to the officers, “and so are you!”

Join us.

Nadine Murshid has been a regular visitor to various Occupy blogs. Her concern is with the parts that do not fit the grand narrative: "I'm not saying that I or people are not a part of the 99%, but there is a difference between an individual who belongs in the bottom 5% and an individual who belongs in the bottom 50%. That difference means that their needs are different, and so, their demands should be different too! As such, rooting for the same cause may or may not be advantageous to all. Individuals need to think for themselves, as well as for the group, and then regroup when necessary, based on actual shared interests."<sup>4</sup>

Something like that regrouping is happening now. The power hosing of Zuccotti is mourned and the impact is felt everywhere, with the loss of physical organizing space. At the same time, a movement that became too consumed with protecting one square block of "public" property is now freed of that burden. People can move in to and through their affinity groups, rhizomatic in structure, open to many new possibilities, and difficult to coopt. Gregory Sholette calls this "Spores, buds, mushrooms, swarms, rhizomes, air, water; the swarmchive has emerged as a thing that seems to ask: What Am I?"<sup>5</sup>

In November, one sign I photographed said: "This is the beginning of the beginning." That seems the most accurate prediction. Nothing will end, or be completed, this year, or any time soon; things have only just been set in motion. Somewhere out there George Orwell's question is circulating: "Shall the common man be pushed back into the mud, or shall he not? I myself believe, perhaps on insufficient grounds, that the common man will win his fight sooner or later, but I want it to be sooner and not later— some time within the next hundred years, say, and not some time within the next ten thousand years."<sup>6</sup>

Orwell wrote this in 1943.

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1 Bernard Yack. *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1986.

2 John Avildsen, *Joe*, Cannon Films, 1970.

3 Norm Stamper, "Paramilitary Policing From Seattle to Occupy Wall Street," *The Nation*, 11/28/2011.

4 Nadine Murshid, comment posted on OccupyDuniya.wordpress.com, 12/18/2011.

5 Gregory Sholette, "OCCUPOLOGY, SWARMOLOGY, WHATEVEROLOGY: the city of (dis)order versus the people's archive," *ART JOURNAL* (Online), WINTER, 2011

6 George Orwell, "Looking back on the Spanish war," *A Collection of Essays*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1946.