REACH

CURATED BY
SARAH FRITCHEY + MARTHA WILLETTE LEWIS

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VERTICAL REACH IN CONVERSATION WITH THE CURATORS

Martha Lewis: These are complex times, politically — does it make sense to put together topical exhibitions on subjects that change so rapidly?

Sarah Fritchey: The fact that it marked an unstable time was one of the defining features of *Vertical Reach*. For me, the moment when everything is unsettled and in disarray is exactly the right time to be looking at it — anyway, does a stable moment ever exist? When the event is unfolding — that is the space where a viewer and artwork can meet. If you're constantly waiting for a moment of political upheaval to settle before you attempt to document it, then you're perpetually curating with a retrospective glance.

We organized the show in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea, an event covered by Western media in part because it was very violent. The show presented strategies for participating in and responding to public protest, like that in Maidan Nezalezhnosti, and some works more easy to identify as "artistic practice" than others.

ML: Are you thinking of any work in particular?

SF: Yes — Artur Zmijewski and Yael Bartana's film, which is a series of handheld video recordings from a peace protest in Gaza. Nothing overtly artistic is applied to the film; there's no explicit violence, narrative arc, fancy camera tricks, or literal storytelling. The film ends abruptly with a child blowing out a candle, which is the most climatic moment, but then it's over. (*fig.1*) There's no resolution or summary.

ML: Is what you are getting at is that there is a self-conscious lack of



fig. 1

perhaps we should be suspicious of artistry? Speaking of artistry, do you feel like you encounter artistry in the news media frequently? We have all certainly grown to be more mistrustful of it.

artistry in that film and that

SF: Right — when you look at *The New York Times* from

the comfort of your home, there's a sense that what you're seeing is fractured or not the full picture. The writing is polished and the images are beautifully gruesome, almost reminiscent of early Civil War photography where photographers staged the dead soldiers to make the best composition. How about you? Did you feel like the artwork in the show dismantled some of these smoke and mirrors?

ML: Zbigneiw Libera's *Final Judgement* literally mimicked this type of theatrical game that you're describing — elegantly playing with

our hopes, fears, and rage over the aftermath of the economic collapse. (fig.2) The sly humor extending to the fact that we might want an "economic Nuremberg" but know perfectly well that none is genuinely forthcoming. This work was so immediate — accessible and strong visually. I liked how audiences related to it.

SF: Yes, it was frequently the first work I took student groups to when doing tours of the show.

ML: It was also a standout

fig. 2

moment for Artspace, as this was the work's US debut, and I think that it really made a lasting impression on our audiences. The ripple effect of the exhibition is in many ways more important than the show itself.

SF: This show was such an adventure. Conceptually where we started and what we ended up evolved to be so different, remember?

ML: I felt like every day there was something new to consider! The learning curve was steep, and we were combing European and Middle Eastern blogs and websites for unfolding news until the day of the opening, and thereafter, to get the most complete picture. The Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw's publication Post-Post-Soviet? Art, Politics & Society in Russia At the Turn of the Decade helped fill in a lot of the historical context for protest and artistic practice in Eastern Europe. But the spatial and cultural distances were large and anxiety-provoking. Looking back, we weren't sure all the work would make it through customs.

SF: Yes! I was sad to toss the idea of including a work by David Ter-Oganyan from his *This is not a bomb* series early on in the planning phase, but David discouraged us from even attempting to get it through customs.

ML: Probably a good thing, given our small budget and staff....

I was surprised that Anastasiya Ryabova's flagpoles made it through customs. (fig. 3) The work criticized the foundation and terms of Russian nationalism, by undermining their national flags. But as objects on a customs list, they're simple metal hardware.

SF: Yes, and in situ, they looked like expensive pieces of modern art. Maybe we could have smuggled in David's ersatz bombs after all, if we had described the contents as: Coca-Cola, wires, clock, duct tape?

ML: That's funny. Humor and disguise did play a prominent role in the show. Many artists used humor as a strategy for casually evading political censorship. **SF:** Humor and entertainment! I kept describing the philosophy of the show as "to educate, sometimes we must first entertain." I think this is the reason we didn't include work by some very important Eastern European artists, whom some people might have expected to encounter.

ML: We also made a point of including young artists making work within the past five years, which we referenced in the exhibition title, by adding the adverb "*Now!*"

SF: Speaking of "*Now!*", you visited Poland twice to do research for this show. Did you see a difference in the work coming out of your first trip in 2012, pre-Euromaidan, and second visit in 2014?

ML: On both visits, there was a sort of hot and cold range. On the one hand, artists were busy archiving the past, and thinking about photography and things that at least looked like documentary footage. On the other hand, there was absurd humor and violence. I am grateful to the Poland.us Campus Project and Culture.pl for having this remarkable experience.

SF: What connects these two modes of art making for you?



fig. 3

ML: Maybe that both are responding to speed — things are changing so fast, and there's a fear of history being erased, which happened under Stalin.

SF: You could sense this fear of erasure in Nikita Kadan's porcelain plates. (*fig.* 4)

Mounted on the wall, they threatened to fall at any moment! And if they had shattered, they would have destroyed the illustrations of police torture that the artist printed on their centers — arms hand-cuffed to a radiator, a plastic bag placed over a man's head, a cigarette burning a woman's nipple.

ML: The new map that Zuzanna Janin made to accompany her video also activated a sense of memory loss. She encased it in a heavy frame so that the information behind it felt trapped, cloudy and very distant. You could barely trace out the route she marked, which denoted the path the she took on her journey to the borders of the IK-32

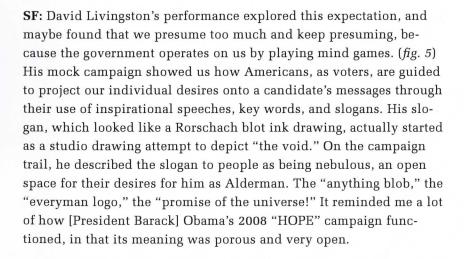
Corrective labor colony which is in a very remote point, near the Urals, in Russia...

SF: I'm curious. Do you feel like the US-based artists in the show expressed a fear of history being erased?

ML: For the most part, I think Americans operate with the expectation that they have and will always

retain the right to freedom of speech — be it in a conversation or to access to the Internet.

fig. 4



ML: Yes, and the undercurrent is that every year we vote for people who have polled us, listened to what we want, shake our hands, only to echo our desires back to us in sponsored campaign speeches.

David made the piece when he started questioning why he showed up to vote in the first place. The work questions how much agency we actually have as voters participating in a free election.



SF: Also, there's a sense that our own personal desires for

fig 5

future change outweigh our drive to reflect critically on the past. As a fight or flight response, we look forward to the future for the promise of "greater equality," or "social mobility," or even more generally, "progress."

ML: It's striking, how reminiscent Livingston's mock campaign is of the psychological and semantic games being played in Russia and Ukraine. Especially his campaign speech, which was void of content, but somehow inspirational.

SF: Yes, he pulled from a lot of actual speeches to design that speech. My favorite part is when he dedicates his campaign to "hard-working people," "businessmen having a time," "life, love, and liberty," "my father's rat farm," "dancing in the street," "cardboard boxes and beads." He delivers the message with such conviction, even in the moment that it dissolves into parody, and then comes back to the colloquial line "we will prevail as one." Can you describe a point of connection in the show?

ML: For me, Livingston's work strongly relates to Ter-Oganyan's criminal sketches of [Russian President] Vladimir Putin, which portray the president as a generic white man, suggesting that he could be anyone. (fig. 6) Both have a bland interactive element and play off of the aspects of desire and personal wish-fulfillment in politics. What you see is what you want to see, and what you see is being manipulated to other ends.

SF: I like this read of Ter-Oganyan, and it reminds of me how the works also explore a shared concern for repetition and mass distri-

bution. Ter-Oganyan chose to reproduce the same stock criminal sketches of Putin four times, as if to say, he was elected into office four times and this could go on ad infinitum. Livingston similarly leveraged his Rorschach blot ink drawing into a campaign slogan, which he reprinted and distributed as campaign buttons, fliers, and lawn signs. The image was all over town-to this day I still see buttons on people's backpacks.



Путин В.В. 1952 года рождения

fig. 6

ML: This brings up how many different ideologies were brought together in this show....

SF: Right — Pussy Riot's *Punk Prayer* dealt with Putin and his image very differently. (*fig. 7*) While Ter-Oganyan's series could



fig. 7

be read partially as a criticism of the Western media's portrayal of Putin as a perpetual thug, Pussy Riot's performance is explicitly unsympathetic and pro-emancipation. If you read the translated lyrics of the song, you can hear that it is a direct indictment against Putin. They scream "Mother of God, rid us of Putin. Liberty is dead and gone...!"

ML: This multiplicity of view points was important curatorially speaking, given the kaleidoscopic nature of events and characters in the unfolding drama. Looking back, the experience refreshed my ideas about what a political exhibit can look like, and how a curator

might participate in the process. Artistic culture is a fragile ecology under constant pressure, and we supported a display of vying and somewhat unpopular ideas.

SF: Yes, I think that the art institution is the one place left where we actively critique the image. As curators, it's our job to lead this investigation and make it accessible to audiences. Especially at this point in time, where the image frequently replaces language. For me, this show was an opportunity to pause to cross-examine the image. To think about who made it, what it's made of, and why.

ML: I enjoyed our partnership here, I like curating shows where one learns, as opposed to knowing all the answers and projecting them visually in the gallery space.

SF: Me too — I hope you're still racing to follow those blogs.

ML: You know I am....

Image Credits

Fig. 1

Still from Artur Żmijewski and Yael Bartana. Demonstration Against War in Gaza Tel Aviv-Yafo, Israel (17 January 2009) single channel video projection, 4:50 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich.

Fig. 2

Zbigniew Libera, Economic Nuremberg #2 (2014) archival pigment print on cotton paper, 160 x 187.5 centimeters. Image courtesy of Raster Gallery, Warsaw.

Fig. 3

Anastasia Ryabova, Where is your flag dude? (2011) installation-flags, brackets, colors, markers. Image courtesy of Artspace, John Groo, photographer.

Fig. 4

Nikita Kadan, $Procedure\ Room\ (2009-2010)$ hotprint images on porcelain plates, $6\times4\times10$ inches each. Image courtesy of François Ghebaly, Los Angeles.

Fig. 5

David Livingston, VOTE FOR 2015 Alderman Campaign (2015) mixed media and performance. Image courtesy of the artist.

Fig.6

David Ter-Oganyan, V. Putin (Portraits of Russian Government Series) (2005) digital print on paper, 50 x 40 centimeters each. Image courtesy of the artist.

Fig.7

Pussy Riot, Punk Prayer-Mother of God, Chase Putin Away! (2012) video, 1:03 minutes. Image courtesy of the artists.

ARTISTS + ARTWORKS

YEVGENIA BELORUSETS
CHTO DELAT?
ZUZANNA JANIN
NIKITA KADAN
ZBIGNIEW LIBERA
DAVID LIVINGSTON
LAURA MARSH
ANGEL NEVAREZ + VALERIE TEVERE
ANASTASIYA OSIPOVA + MATTHEW WHITLEY
PUSSY RIOT
ANASTASIA RYABOVA
GREGORY SHOLETTE
DAVID TER-OGANYAN
MARIYA VLASOVA
ARTUR ŻMIJEWSKI + YAEL BARTANA



The Candidacy 2015 mixed media and performance Courtesy of the artist.

DAVID LIVINGSTON (B. UNITED STATES)

Livingston initially developed his series of inkblot campaign drawings as a corollary to his ongoing worm sculptures. The blobs evolved from wormhole "voids" into complex rounded forms that resembled Rorschach tests. As this idea matured. the artist sought a way to make people look at them as images containing valuable information.

For Vertical Reach, Artspace commissioned Livingston to transform the drawings into campaign signs for a performance where he ran for Alderman of an imaginary ward in New Haven. The project grew to include lawn signs, brochures, buttons, and a district map. On Election Day, November 2, 2014, Livingston pounded the pavement, canvassing popular intersections in downtown New Haven, and delivering a "stump speech" on the town Green.

To preserve the tone of traditional presidential speeches, Livingston adopted persuasive tactics. He said "we" instead of "I" to build a sense of community among voters, packed in language, like "God Bless America," to inspire and excite, and met voters with a firm hand shake. The speech was absurd. It was developed to test out if he could say nothing at all, but effectively inspire confidence in potential undecided voters.

For his installation in the Artspace galleries, Livingston created an environment that was equal parts campaign headquarters and therapist office. He placed his campaign materials and performance stills from Election Day around the office visitors were invited to lie on his couch for a therapy appointment, or watch his Subliminal Ad Campaign to extract their unconscious political desires.