REVOLUTION FROM WITHOUT...
An unassumingly titled manuscript “A Lecture,” written between 1966 and 1967, mapped the conditions of revolutionary movements of the 20th century as “the end of imperialism under the pressure of nationalism [that] has led to the dissemination of the idea of revolution all over the globe.” “A Lecture” was written by Hannah Arendt, perhaps for a talk given at the University of Chicago where she taught at the School on Social Thought, or as Graduate Faculty at the New School for Social Research.

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freedom of expression in art might manifest as symbolic gestures that with it are evidence of a revolutionary outcome. In the realms of politics

and of the admission of all to the public realm and participation in the democratic process, and the U.S. Constitution. All the rights that come with it are evidence of a revolutionary outcome. In the realms of politics and art, freedom takes on different forms. Freedom of expression in a political sense might be realized in the distribution of anti-war leaflets; freedom of expression in art might manifest as symbolic gestures that may or may not involve the use of language, with perhaps an abstract, or indirect intent.

In spite of free speech being integral to democracy in the United States, its contours have fluctuated throughout this country’s history. In 1798, the Alien and Sedition Acts made it a crime for American citizens to “print, utter, or publish... any false, scandalous, and malicious writing” about the government, an early attempt to curtail dissent against a political administration. During World War II, the aforementioned distribution of anti-war leaflets was punishable by imprisonment. In 1922, feminist Margaret Sanger was arrested for giving a speech about birth control. In 1923, the author Upton Sinclair was arrested for reading the First Amendment at a union rally. Arrests like these, and excessive suppression of speech by abolitionists, religious minorities, suffragists, labor organizers, and pacifists, led to the founding of the American Civil Liberties Union in 1920.  

By Reading This You Agree to Overthow Dictators (2017) is a conceptual artwork by Dread Scott originally produced for “Speak Out Inauguration Day” hosted by the Whitney Museum of American Art on January 20, 2017. Scott’s piece is stenciled in the vestibule at the entrance of the gallery. It is an open-source artwork that can exist in any form. Surrounded by the repetition of the words By Reading This You Agree to Overthow Dictators implicates, or at all challenges, the reader to question how we, as individuals, relate to the political artworks before us. It also raises questions about what activism is: Where does an activist find their voice? Is activism an impossible, to parse out the rich and complex systems of information – extremes due to our newfangled, unedited television, the Internet. While the web is more democratic in terms of participation, literally anything can be published, unchecked, as “fact.”

In Arendt’s lecture, which was published in 2018 as a chapter (in a collection of her essays) with the title “The Freedom to Be Free: The Conditions and Meaning of Revolution,” she teases out the inextricable connections between freedom of expression, political activity, and the ability to describe a movement towards a pre-established point, “a swinging back to a previously held order.” Arendt explains that revolution in the 17th century did not involve overthrowing a dictator, rather, it was the reestablishment of the monarchy that came after the power structure was dismantled. As the ambitions of revolutionaries have evolved, this reworking of a previous order anew has transformed into aspirations for greater impossibilities to be free to make a new beginning.  

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The American Civil Rights Movement took in a society moving from radio to television—evolutionary acceptance of visual culture—Television had [once again] become a perceptual focal point... Television had [once again] become a metaphor to describe a movement towards a pre-established point, “a swinging back to a previously held order.” Arendt explains that revolution in the 17th century did not involve overthrowing a dictator, rather, it was the reestablishment of the monarchy that came after the power structure was dismantled. As the ambitions of revolutionaries have evolved, this reworking of a previous order anew has transformed into aspirations for greater impossibilities to be free to make a new beginning.

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to those who were born to fly but sank instead
who left their home, a bed, a room, child, children, a tree, a river,
a mother, a tongue, a friend, a cat
and walked some countless miles away
who were crushed by the hospitality of detention centers and private jails
who were welcomed by german shepherds
who enjoyed an abundance of cyanocarbon (as if they hadn’t cried enough)
who witnessed all the virtues of all the king’s men
and who will still hold up that wounded bird until their last breath

What is to be done in the face of this level of injustice? And what constitutes resolution at this point in time? To wait and see, to hope, for wish for something better is no longer viable. These impulses can help advance a more targeted effort, but in a time of such extreme despair captured by the art of Raqs Media Collective, it shames us to talk about revolution as the logical strategy or disposition toward Black emancipation.”

It is Raqs Media Collective’s hope to invert the logic of a border wall upside down. Furthermore, they inquire: Can this prototype wall structure become the site where counter-narratives are inscribed and where we can play the system from within the system but according to its own rules? Can a wall become a conduit as opposed to a divide by rethinking its structure? Can we imagine a wall that is intentionally permeable? Or even a self-destructive wall that conquers against its own intentions?

By rethinking the wall as an ephemeral, porous, and fluid entity, its politically oppressive power is undermined, leading to other notions of the wall as a threshold, a more dynamic, and less intimidating prototype. If Raqs Media Collective’s line of questioning feels unrealistically utopian, Arndt made a case for throwing away the systems that have outlived their knowledge, like faith), or, she asks, “do we hope in the absence of that hope evidence based (perhaps based on past experience, historical theoretical frameworks)? I am both interested in and skeptical of hope as an alternative to political ends. Here, she takes up the word ‘HOPE,’ which many will recognize as one of the iconic and successful slogans of Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. She writes, “Given my own lived experiences and my very recent engagement with the discourses of Afro-pessimism, Black Nihilism, even Black optimism, and other political discourses, I am both interested in and skeptical of hope as an alternative to political ends. Here, she takes up the word ‘HOPE,’ which many will recognize as one of the iconic and successful slogans of Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. She writes, “Given my own lived experiences and my very recent engagement with the discourses of Afro-pessimism, Black Nihilism, even Black optimism, and other political discourses, I am both interested in and skeptical of hope as an alternative to political ends. Here, she takes up the word ‘HOPE,’ which many will recognize as one of the iconic and successful slogans of Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. 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One that changes form, shape-shifting from architectural structure to a fluttering textile. The artist asks, “can a national wall structure be imagined so as to question the original intentions of the Federal Government? Can a ‘welcoming’ and useful wall be created, one that serves the communities that it is meant to separate and proposes an alternative solution to human segmentation, when it comes to issues such as immigration and asylum?” It is Raqs Media Collective’s hope to invert the logic of a border wall upside down. Furthermore, they inquire:

Can this prototype wall structure become the site where counter-narratives are inscribed and where we can play the system from within the system but according to its own rules? Can a wall become a conduit as opposed to a divide by rethinking its structure? Can we imagine a wall that is intentionally permeable? Or even a self-destructive wall that conquers against its own intentions?

By rethinking the wall as an ephemeral, porous, and fluid entity, its politically oppressive power is undermined, leading to other notions of the wall as a threshold, a more dynamic, and less intimidating prototype.
It is important to remember that the idea of freedom was introduced into the debate of the war question after it had become quite obvious that we had reached a stage of technical development where the means of destruction were such as to exclude their rational use. Returning to the question of what to be done, at a time when hope has lost some of its meaning, we need to remember that we still possess the will to think on our own terms. By continuing to challenge what we think is possible, we can be assured by the fact that even in the most dire of situations, we will think our way forward—from thought to action, and all of the processes in between: reflection, research, communication, and organization, hopefully leading to a civic literacy that ultimately raises the level of justice for all.

**Endnotes**


3. Ibid. p. 384


5. Ibid.


9. Ibid.


13. Ibid.


16. Ibid.


20. Ibid.

21. “Die Gedanken sind frei / My thoughts freely flower, Die Gedanken sind frei / My thoughts give me power, No scholar can map them / No hunter can trap them, No one can deny / Die Gedanken sind frei.”

22. “Die Gedanken sind frei” (author unknown) dates back to the 16th century, if not earlier, and is thought to have been written during the Peasants War of 1524-1526. The lyrics above come from a translation by Mark Wallinger, Threshold to the Kingdom, 2000. Video projection, audio. 11:20 min. Film stills. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. © Mark Wallinger

23. This essay is either a mandate for the arts, at a time when the President threatens to shut down government unless his wall gets built, or a prose poem that occurred to me while spending over 200 hours with Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and in immigration court. The argument that this is a prose poem is based primarily on repetition and fuses fuera de contexto (out of context phrases), to use a term by the poet Roberto Bolano.

24. Humiliation and stigmatization happens to immigrants repeatedly. Future immigrants too will be singled out.

25. Or is awful repatriation life for everyone?

26. While writing this, a 7-year-old girl died of exposure while in CBP custody.

27. Abolish ICE

If Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) were abolished, and the campaign slogan of Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of the South Bronx comes to pass, we should consider using their spaces for the art featured in this exhibition about rights and privileges. In all the time I have spent in secondary interviews at JFK, behind glass partitions at Peace Bridge, Buffalo, while getting paroled entry, and at 26 Federal Plaza in Manhattan before an ICE judge, I would like to have entertained myself by viewing these works of art, instead of the portraits of Presidents Trump and Obama and other dismal signs on the wall. I’ll get to the differences between the Obama and Trump administrations when it comes to immigrants. The artists in Revolution from Without... are the kind of people that were with me during secondary; on my side of the norm, behind glass partitions, but their work is also on gallery walls. On the walls of ICE, their art intermingles with my own ideas. So yes, I am asking all of our imaginations to play a weird trick, to be simultaneously with and without power. It is a strange phenomena how much more one wants to change the world and its systems, the more dramatically one is constrained by them.

Secondary is what Customs and Border Patrol calls the process when a CBP officer takes you for further questioning without saying please. These days, artists should feel that they are at least in secondary. It’s their work you want to see in your mind while waiting at ICE. Paroled visits are too difficult to explain, except that they limit your legal and curtail freedom of movement.

All of the terms that immigrants learn about the immigration system they learn because of repetition. Nothing is clear at first. In this system, secondary is only the beginning of your troubles. I must have channeled Tania Bruguera’s Referendum—a public, participatory performance questioning whether borders should be abolished, performed in Union Square in 2016—when asked by CBP each time on my paroled visits.
whatever he said blasphemous in present day Pakistan, and he founded a
religion – The Nation of Islam – to preach. The FBI hounded him out of
Detroit, and he was last seen boarding a plane leaving the city.
I wanted to write an art manifesto here, but what I’d really like is a mural
in Flatbush depicting the W.D. story. I’d own a t-shirt of that mural. On
that t-shirt, it would have the title of Lenin’s famous pamphlet: What Is To
Be Done? (Chris Detaliat).

The mural can be numerously titled: The white supremacists are right
to fear. Immigrants will replace them. They can do their worst, and one
did, massacring a scripture that supports refugees. I imagine W.D.
authorized all the #Whilteback statements in the right column of Dread
Scott’s work.
One can feel aggressively imaginative waiting 3-5 hours at CBP, or when
detained overnight.

Wint in the East River
I also took books with me, so I could put them nonchalantly on the
counter while responding to a CBP officer. I imagined that they’d think a
reader is more harmless. But, to make sure I didn’t look upshifty (though
I sounded so) I always ensured it was not a new publication. Forget a
shiny new Ta’Nihisi Coates, I’ll bring my dog-eared James Baldwin.

The devil isn’t met his match
I liken Kameelah Janan Rasheed’s text-based installation to the bits of
scraps I’ve never made sense, except once. I wish the scraps could
be counted on to read like her art: I see flat, shiny new Ta’Nihisi Coates, I’ll bring my dog-eared James Baldwin.

Every border is a wall and behind every wall is an idea of a new
sanctuary. As, I suppose, is the idea of the Magna Carta – whatever it
was and whoever it served originally, however unstable its origins –
what matters is that the idea grew and incorporated habeas corpus. That is
sanctuary, and I imagine it extending to everyone.

The fifty-first psalm (set to Allegri’s famous composition). It goes:
4. Completely wash away my iniquities
And make me pure despite my sins
5. Because my crimes I acknowledge
And my sins haunt me endlessly
6. Before You and You alone I sinned
I did evil in your eyes
So that Your words will be justified.
So that You will be right in your verdict
20. Do good as is Your will, to Zion
Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem!
I imagine it playing loudly. Maybe it would embarrass the officers.

Arthur Ashe and a Jewish mother’s response to...
One evening in the fall of 2009 CBP wanted to take away my legal
status as a permanent resident alien. Their intention made as much
sense to me as what the CBP head said to me, so very late that night
it was morning: “Don’t think we are doing this to you because of
what I know you are thinking.” It was only when the Asian American
Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) took up my case that I
received an explanation. AALDEF had reason to believe that there was
an undisclosed memorandum circulating the Department of Homeland
Security targeting legal immigrants who were Muslim men from Muslim
majority countries.

The only time I identify as Muslim in America is when a Muslim country
is bombed by the U.S. At other times, what I think of Islam is not
considered Islamic by most-to-all Muslims. And as for other Americans,
Muslim religion and culture are incomprehensible no matter what.
For example, do you know the difference between Shia and Sunni, even
though the U.S. has been involved for 30 years in a conflict in Iraq
and for 40 years in a not-so-hot one with Iran, and 20 years in a war in
Afghanistan?

I see Dread Scott’s map, Imagine a World Without America, and think
of the city as conjoined to murderous and imperial policies. Most
New Yorkers see the world without acknowledging the implications of
American foreign policy.

What I found out that night in Buffalo was that many of the officers at
CBP are veterans. They fought a war that many don’t even understand

—how can you?— and were standing guard against me. When they returned my phone, I called my father, and he, who combines both Arthur Ashe and a Jewish mother, said, “Argue. Argue for rights even if you don’t acknowledge them.”

Borders

My father’s last neighborhood in Delhi was Karol Bagh (or Carroll Gardens, as Whitman of Brooklyn would translate it, if he could from Urdu). That’s the neighborhood he fled from with his mother on the 3rd train out of Delhi. The 4th got massacred. Shuddha’s Raqs Media Collective took my father around the Ansari neighborhoods of the 40’s. Karol Bagh, Pahar Ganj, Darya Ganj. Somedays the refugee/immigrant/criminal experience feels unbearable, and you can do something about it. In the third hour of my paroled entry being processed, a CBP officer and I would hold hands. There is no other way for the officer to get the alien’s fingerprint onto the scanner. They must hold my fingers gently, one by one, to get the smudge just right. They played nice after this ritual. I can also claim that art does ICE good. The ICE prosecutor and I had an exchange prior to the hearing, when he, a large white man, true to the look of an ICE official in my imagination thus far, told me that he looked me up online and read my writing. “I am a writer too,” he said. **

Also at the end is hope in protest.

In the summer before my hearing, Obama had been embarrassed by the Dreamers’ protests and the administration put out a memorandum for the Department of Homeland Security to only go after violentcriminals.

In the end, I can claim a border is made up of human beings who can choose to act as human beings, as Hannah Arendt might say. In the third hour of my paroled entry being processed, a CBP officer and I would hold hands. There is no other way for the officer to get the alien’s fingerprint onto the scanner. They must hold my fingers gently, one by one, to get the smudge just right. They played nice after this ritual. I can also claim that art does ICE good. The ICE prosecutor and I had an exchange prior to the hearing, when he, a large white man, true to the look of an ICE official in my imagination thus far, told me that he looked me up online and read my writing. “I am a writer too,” he said.

Endnote