



**REVOLUTION FROM WITHOUT...**

# Thoughts Are Free

—SARA REISMAN

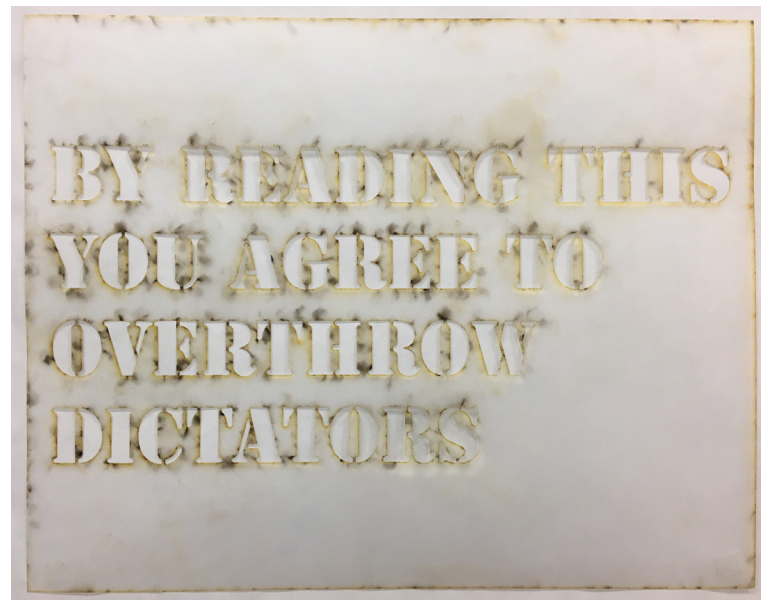
An unassumingly titled manuscript “A Lecture,” written between 1966 and 1967, mapped the conditions of revolutionary movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as “the end of imperialism under the pressure of nationalism [that] has led to the dissemination of the idea of revolution all over the globe.”<sup>1</sup> “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, where she accepted a position the following year.<sup>2</sup> The lecture provides context for our understanding of revolutionary impulses in the current moment. Updated for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, specifically 2019, this equation –waning imperialism, multiplied or divided by nationalism– would need to additionally account for the effects of unchecked capitalism in the present day.

“A Lecture” outlines recurrent conditions that have spurred revolutions throughout history –namely poverty and political oppression, which Arendt distinguishes as very separate forces– as well as the origins of revolution as a concept with multiple meanings. In astronomy, it signifies the movement of heavenly bodies, while politically, the term was used as a metaphor to describe a movement towards a pre-established point, “a swinging back to a pre-ordained order.”<sup>3</sup> Arendt explains that revolution in the 17<sup>th</sup> 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 restoring of a previous order anew has transformed into aspirations for greater possibilities –“being free to make a new beginning.”<sup>4</sup>

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 and revolution, citing “revolution’s original goal [as] freedom in the sense of the abolition of personal rule and of the admission of all to the public realm and participation in the administration of affairs common to all.”<sup>5</sup>

This “admission of all to the public realm,” and the administration of affairs as commonly shared responsibilities, are embedded in U.S. 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.<sup>6</sup> During World War I, the aforementioned distribution of anti-war leaflets was punishable by imprisonment. In 1912, feminist Margaret Sanger was arrested for giving a speech about



Dread Scott, *Overthrow Dictators*, 2017. Conceptual text, laser cut acetate. Courtesy of the artist.

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.<sup>7</sup>

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*By Reading This You Agree to Overthrow Dictators* (2017) is a conceptual artwork by Dread Scott originally produced for “Speak Out on 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 Overthrow Dictators* implicates, or at least 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 gesture begin and end? Somewhere between thought and action there are processes of reflection, research, organization, and communication. Reading is no small part of this process, yet it is difficult, likely impossible, to parse out the rich and complex systems of information – much of it received through reading– that we absorb on a constant basis, and how this information is processed into action.

Like many of the text-based videos Tony Cokes is known for, *Evil.12*. (*edit.b*): *Fear, Spectra & Fake Emotions* (2009) requires attentive reading on the part of the viewer. Cokes weaves together excerpts of Brian Massumi’s 2005 essay “Fear (The Spectrum Said)” to create videos that, in their ambiguity, echo the manipulative tendencies of the media and government in their construction of public messaging. Cokes’ editing guides the viewer through a narrative, sometimes cohesive, at other times fragmented. In this piece, he distills the politically motivated color-coded alert system implemented following 9/11, that was deployed in airports, on the news, and at tollbooths on interstate highways, to alert the public to the terror threat level at any given time. Massumi writes:

The alert system was introduced to calibrate the public’s anxiety.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the public’s fearfulness had tended to swing out of control in response to dramatic, but maddeningly vague, government warnings of an impending follow-up attack. The alert system was designed to modulate that fear. It could raise it a pitch, then lower it before it became too intense, or even worse, before habituation dampened response. Timing was everything. Less fear itself than fear fatigue became an issue of public concern. Affective modulation of the populace was now an official, central function of an increasingly time-sensitive government.<sup>8</sup>

Watching Cokes’ video is a reminder of how a spike in the color alert system quickly registered as news itself. As receivers of this information, we became subject to fear, produced for reasons not fully understood. Yet, the widespread trust in televised ‘news’ following 9/11 focused the American imagination, rife with anxiety. Massumi explains, “In a time of crisis, television was once again providing a perceptual focal point for the spontaneous mass coordination of affect . . . Television had [once again] become the *event* medium.”<sup>9</sup> Since Massumi’s piece was written in 2005, our relationship to television has been substantially diffused by the Internet. In the realm of social media, particularly following the 2016 presidential election, it could be argued that schools of ideological thought have been bifurcated into political 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.”

To expand upon Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the interrelated nature of freedom and revolution in the present day, one might ask, what form does freedom take in 2019? If freedom is ideally comprised of a set of rights –mobility, suffrage, speech, and religion, among others– how do these rights characterize contemporary life in this country? The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states:

CONGRESS SHALL MAKE NO LAW respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech; or the right of the people to peaceably assemble, and to petition Government for a redress of grievances. (December 15, 1791)

The language of the First Amendment resonates continuously, but most people reading this essay will likely have been witness to violations of free speech and expression in the U.S.: in the news, at work, online, on the street. According to the ACLU, free speech is “the matrix, the indispensable condition of nearly every other form of freedom.”<sup>10</sup> Tania Bruguera, a self-described *artista* (a hybrid of artist and activist) has questioned free speech – with language and symbolic gestures through various iterations of *Tatlin’s Whisper*. The project has involved staging visual quotations, reenacted through interactive means, using

Citizens had to imagine what it would be like to survive without access

The American Civil Rights Movement took hold in a society moving from radio to television—

Tony Cokes, *Evil.27.Selma*, 2011. Digital video, color, stereo. 9 min. Courtesy Tony Cokes; Greene Naftali, New York; and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

The collapse of the World Trade Center towers had glued the populace to the TV screen

it had so dramatically declared in the days following 9/11.

Tony Cokes, *Evil.12*. (*edit.b*): *Fear, Spectra & Fake Emotions*, 2009. Digital video, color, stereo. 11:43 min. Courtesy Tony Cokes; Greene Naftali, New York; and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

“historically recurrent images . . .” asking if our main source of political education can be transformed.<sup>11</sup> In 2009, *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* (*Havana Version*) was staged during the Havana Bienal, in the courtyard of the Wifredo Lam Contemporary Art Center, where Bruguera offered a largely Cuban audience a minute to speak freely and uncensored as individuals, into a microphone. A previous iteration of *Tatlin’s Whisper, #5*, performed in 2008 at Tate Modern in London, featured two mounted officers, whose presence on horseback forced the public to move in different directions and question why they were being corralled without explanation. In titling this series, Bruguera makes symbolic reference to Vladimir Tatlin:

Russian artist and architect Vladimir Tatlin . . . created the Tower Monument, envisioned as the seat for the Third Communist International, an icon of the enthusiasm and grandiosity of the Bolshevik Revolution. The intensity, credibility, and exaltation of socialist revolutions, just as Tatlin’s Tower, which was never built, were frustrated and utopia is rethought with the effort implied in a weak whisper.<sup>12</sup>

Specifically, Bruguera is interested in reclaiming what she refers to as “active citizenry,” which is essential to constructing a politically-engaged reality, where everyone has a stake in working against the tendency for ideology to be subsumed and reduced by the news cycle into soundbytes. Bruguera’s ongoing work in the context of Cuba –from her attempted restaging of *Tatlin’s Whisper #6* in 2014, to the Hannah Arendt Institute of Artivism (INSTAR), which she founded in 2016– is designed to facilitate civic literacy and space for free expression,

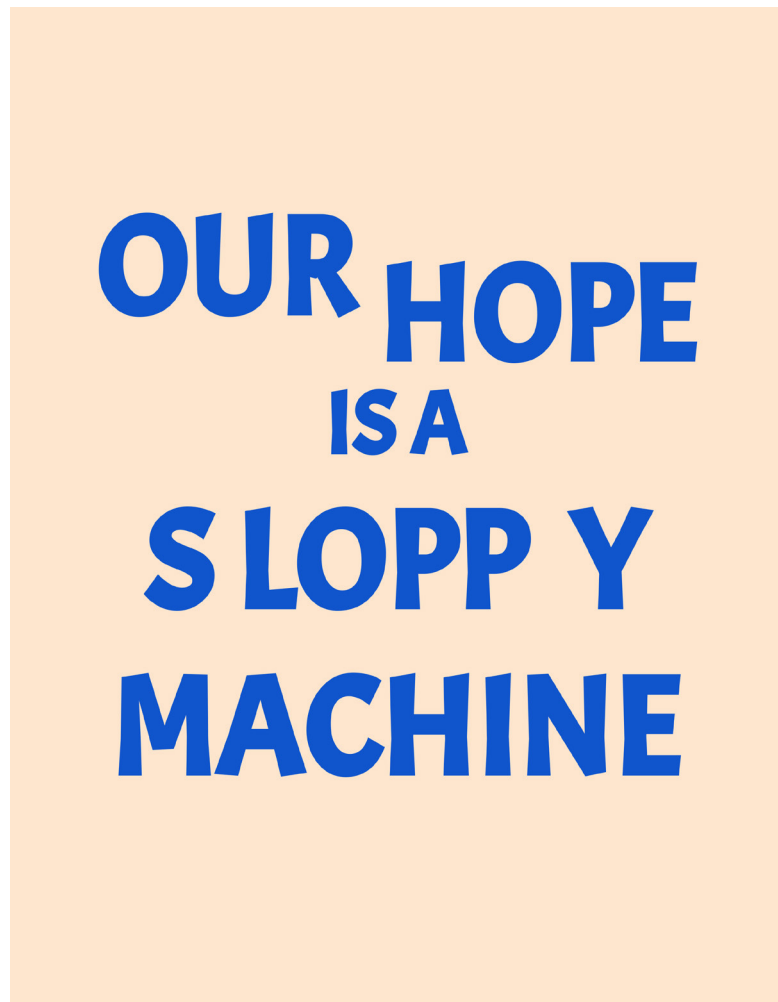
allowing Cubans to move “between art and activism with the intent of participating in political, economic and social change that is redefining Cuba.”<sup>13</sup>

Now, in the midst of the Trump administration, it is clear that maintaining borders is one of the U.S. government’s highest priorities. Bruguera anticipated the question of borders well before the current president’s ascendance to the White House. In November 2015, she staged a *Referendum* on borders for Nuit Blanche in Toronto. In March of 2016, in New York City’s Union Square Park, she orchestrated it in conjunction with *When Artists Speak Truth...*, an exhibition organized by the Rubin Foundation. Bruguera’s second *Referendum* called for a public vote on borders, soliciting from people, regardless of citizenship, a response to the question: “Borders Kill. Should we Abolish Our Borders?” In New York, the majority voted Yes, that borders should be abolished, but each vote required a great deal of discussion about the risks created by borders and the fear of what would happen without them. In an interview at the performance, Bruguera explained how the construct of borders is relatively new, having solidified legally only in the last 100 years.

Since June of 2018, the U.S. has experienced a national crisis at its border with Mexico. The right to seek asylum, which has long been a tenet of human rights in the United States and Western world, is not only being questioned, but is now resulting in abusive policies carried out by border patrol authorities.

With these recent examples of draconian U.S. immigration tactics, it follows that an exhibition concerned with revolution and freedom should attempt to contend with mobility, as it relates to those seeking asylum. Mark Wallinger’s video *Threshold to the Kingdom* (2000) is a meditation on international travel, the single-channel projection is comprised of slow-motion footage depicting travelers as they walk through the arrivals gate at London City Airport. It is set to a soundtrack of *Miserere*, a 17<sup>th</sup> century libretto of the Bible’s fifty-first psalm by the Italian composer Gregorio Allegri (c.1582–1652). He shot the film in 1998 to capture anxieties associated with flying, only to realize the real anxiety was not air travel, but airports, as sites of scrutiny, with constant surveillance and intimidating checkpoints. Projected within the gallery, the passage of travelers through Wallinger’s threshold is elevated to a spiritual and nostalgic experience. Prior to 9/11, much of the tension surrounding international travel in the United Kingdom was due to a fear of terrorism associated with the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Twenty years later, the British face a Brexit referendum to redress the June 2016 vote for the U.K. to withdraw from the European Union, a decision fueled in part by desire to stop the flow of arriving immigrants. The implementation of Brexit will likely result in a hard border being put in place between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, creating more potential for conflict. Some have even called for a physical wall to be built, reminiscent of the situation at the southern border of the United States.

Commissioned to produce two new banners, Russian collective Chto Delat (which translates to ‘What is to be done?’) hone in on the harrowing conditions produced by borders that Bruguera sought to challenge with *Referendum*. Reading a poem written by Nikolay Oleynikov for Chto Delat, the viewer is confronted with an urgency akin to that of Dread Scott’s stenciled installation. The words of the poem dedicated to migrants, titled *Migrants (To Those Who)*, 2019, is sewn like an elaborate flag, functioning as both a memorial and rallying cry:



Kameelah Janan Rasheed, *A Rather Precarious Syntax* (detail), 2019. Mixed media installation. Courtesy of the artist.

**to those who were born to fly but sank instead  
who left their home, a bed, a lover, a 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 revolution at this point in time? To wait and see, to hope, to wish for something better is no longer viable. These impulses can help advance a more targeted effect, but in a time of such extreme despair captured by *To Those Who*, explicit messaging wins out over symbolism. As Arendt states in her aforementioned essay “The Freedom to be Free,” there is the older notion of revolution that is a restorative, and more progressive idea that moves us forward, towards transformation. Many of the artworks in *Revolution from Without...* could be deployed in public space, and used as actual props for protest. Perhaps it is imminent, but ultimately unknowable, when these gestures –some of



Dread Scott, *#WhileBlack*, 2018. Diptych, screen prints. Courtesy of the artist.

them symbolic, others more direct– will have the most impact.

Kameelah Janan Rasheed contributes a new work, titled *A Rather Precarious Syntax* (2019), which is, in part, a play on words examining the limits, frustration, and ultimate transformation of language in its deployment 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 theoretical frameworks, I am both interested in and skeptical of hope as the logical strategy or disposition toward Black emancipation.”<sup>14</sup> Rasheed is curious about how we approach questions of Black emancipation. She asks, “is hope a precursor or prerequisite for emancipation?” She also wonders, for whom are our public displays of hopefulness. Is hope evidence based (perhaps based on past experience, historical knowledge, like faith), or, she asks, “do we hope in the absence of that evidence?” *A Rather Precarious Syntax* will fluctuate in its own way, with the artist making adjustments to the installation periodically over the course of the exhibition, as a way of working through the complexity of hope, and the changeability of language itself. As a thought experiment, Raqs Media Collective’s animation *Undoing Walls* (2017) is a sketch,



one that changes form, shapeshifting from architectural structure to a fluttering textile. The artists ask, can “a ‘dysfunctional’ 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 segregation, when it comes to issues such as immigration and asylum?”<sup>15</sup> 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 resistance takes place? Can we 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 conjures against its own intentions?<sup>16</sup>

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 prospect. If Raqs Media Collective’s line of questioning feels unrealistically utopian, Arendt made a case for throwing away the systems that have outlived their useful life.



Mark Wallinger, *Threshold to the Kingdom*, 2000. Video projection, audio. 11:20 min. Film stills. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. © Mark Wallinger

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.<sup>17</sup>

Returning to the quandary of what is 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.

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**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!**<sup>18</sup>

“Die Gedanken sind frei” (author unknown) dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> 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 Arthur Krevess, published in 1950. Taught in schools in pre-World War II Germany, the song was banned under Nazi rule, and brought by German immigrants to the United States. Pete Seeger has made more than one recording of the song, most notably in the 1966 album “Dangerous Songs.” The protest slogan “die gedanken sind frei” in its earliest version, translates to “Thoughts are free” or “My Thoughts are Free.”<sup>19</sup>

#### Endnotes

1. This essay appears in the current print issue of *The New England Review*. And will be included in *Thinking Without a Banister, Essays in Understanding*, Vol. 11, by Hannah Arendt, edited by J. Kohn, to be published by Schocken Books in January 2018, under the title: “The Freedom to Be Free”.
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4. Hannah Arendt. “Never Before Published Hannah Arendt on What Freedom and Revolution Really Mean: Thoughts on Poverty, Misery, and the Great Revolutions of History.” Literary Hub. August 15, 2017. <https://lithub.com/never-before-published-hannah-arendt-on-what-freedom-and-revolution-really-mean/>.
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6. “The Formation of Political Parties: The Alien and Sedition Acts.” National Archives and Records Administration. [https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/treasures\\_of\\_congress/text/page5\\_text.html](https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/treasures_of_congress/text/page5_text.html).
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8. Brian Massumi. “Fear (The Spectrum Said).” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 13, no. 1 (2005): 31-48. <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.
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10. “Freedom of Expression.” American Civil Liberties Union. <https://www.aclu.org/other/freedom-expression>.
11. Tania Bruguera. “Statement: Tatlin’s Whisper #6 (Havana Version).” Accessed January 04, 2019. [http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/112-0-Tatlin’s Whisper 6 Havana version.html](http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/112-0-Tatlin%20Whisper%206%20Havana%20version.html).
12. “Tania Bruguera: “Art Is Fundamental to the Creation of Civic Literacy in Cuba.”” *Diario Las Américas*, March 31, 2016. <https://www.diariolasamericas.com/tania-bruguera-el-arte-es-fundamental-hacer-una-alfabetizacion-civica-cuba-n3719327>.
13. Ibid.
14. Kameelah Janan Rasheed. “A Rather Precarious Syntax.” E-mail to Sara Reisman. January 2, 2019.
15. Raqs Media Collective. “Undoing Walls.” Raqs Media Collective. <https://www.raqsmediacollective.net/works.aspx>.
16. Ibid.
17. Hannah Arendt. *On Revolution*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990. Originally Printed 1963. p. 14
18. Tilli Horn Schulze and Lorna Collier. *My Thoughts Are Free*. 2005. <http://www.mythoughtsarefree.com/bookclubguide.html>.
19. “Die Gedanken Sind Frei.” Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die\\_Gedanken\\_sind\\_frei](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_Gedanken_sind_frei).



Mark Wallinger, *Writ in Water*, 2018. Stainless steel. Photograph by Timothy Doyon. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. © Mark Wallinger

## Revolution from Without...

—REHAN ANSARI

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 *frases fuera de context* (out of context phrases), to use a term by the poet Roberto Bolaño.

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

Or is awful repetition life for everyone?

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

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### 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 room, 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 legality 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:



Dread Scott, *Imagine a World Without America*, 2006. Screen print. Courtesy of the artist.

“How long have you been in the United States?” Well, longer than the age of the average Williamsburg hipster.

I found self-respect in being a smart-ass.

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*The devil has met his match*

I liken Kameelah Janan Rasheed’s text-based installation to the bits of paper flying around Flatbush Avenue. It is a part of Brooklyn I wish for when caged at ICE. The fluttering detritus intensifies heading south on Flatbush past Caton. It’s as desolate early in the morning as it is late at night, because of the paper. I sometimes pick up pieces to read. They have never made sense, except once. I wish the scraps could be counted on to read like her art: *Our Hope is a Sloppy Machine*. It is very difficult to explain to New Yorkers what happens to me at the border. There are no hopeful analogies that work. How can one explain *the feeling* of being in the immigration system, where everything is reversed? You are guilty until proven innocent.

When else can that happen in the legal system? When you are black.

The one time a flying piece of paper in Flatbush did make sense was when it read “White man is the devil, said W D of the D.” This sounds like one of Dread Scott’s *#WhileBlack* hashtags, and looks like it was spoken by the figure of Angela Davis in the St. Petersburg-based collective Chto Delat’s *Knowledge is Power*.

‘W D of the D’ was the person attributed to have coined the phrase “White man is the devil.” He taught it to Elijah Muhammad. According to an FBI file, no one knows for sure of W.D.’s origins. Some say New Zealand, California, or St. Petersburg, others say Lahore. His mother was Jewish, his father was Muslim. He was Ahmadi, which makes

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 the back, it would have the title of Lenin’s famous pamphlet: What Is To Be Done? (Chto Delat?).

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 synagogue that supports refugees.* I imagine W.D. authored all the *#WhileBlack* 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.

• • •

*Writ 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 uppity (though I sounded so) I always ensured it was not a new publication. Forget a shiny new Ta N’his Coates, I’ll bring my dog-eared James Baldwin.

I once brought one in Urdu, just to have them eye the Persian/Arabic script. It was Nasir Kazmi’s translation of Walt Whitman’s *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*. I was working on the translation to see what in Nasir Kazmi’s translation is NOT in Whitman’s English. Among the last lines of the poem, after accomplishing a rousing sense of the masses, of people, (and there is no descriptor of national or racial origin) it reads “we plant you permanently within us.” The phrase that Kazmi used for this sentiment in Urdu can only be translated back as ‘sanctuary’ – “We give you sanctuary.” I remembered this when looking at Wallinger’s *Writ in Water*, a stainless steel ring with a segment from the Magna Carta written on the interior and reflected in the base, a model of a public artwork. A ring is a circle and a circle is a symbol of sanctuary for the Sufis that I cherish. They circle a circle in the wilderness and call it 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.

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*Every border is a wall and behind every wall is an idea of a new Jerusalem.*

There is a soundtrack to the experience of CBP. It is Fox News on the TV, *sotto voce*. Once, when I was inside CBP facilities in Buffalo, Fox happened to announce that it was a ‘yellow level’ day, which means Elevated Risk. Do you remember the color-coded Homeland Security Advisory System? The different levels of risk triggered specific actions by federal and local governments. I wish Tony Cokes’ animated text video was playing on a screen beside that TV screen showing Fox News. Cokes’ video exposes the lie of this, George W. Bush’s color scheme for mass emotional manipulation, which lasted from 2002 to 2011. And yes, almost all the way through the first Obama Administration.

Instead of Fox’s commentary, I wish they played the soundtrack to Wallinger’s *Threshold to the Kingdom*. It would have helped me emotionally cue myself for CBP’s questions. Wallinger’s video features



Tania Bruguera, *Referendum*, 2016. Still of performance at Union Square New York City, March 6, 2016, 10am to 8pm, in collaboration with the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation. Photograph courtesy of Charles Roussel.

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<sup>1</sup>

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 a world without American foreign policy. But then I had another thought, not fun at all. Living in liberal New York City, one would never 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



Chto Delat (realized by Nikolay Oleynikov), *Knowledge Is Power*, 2011. *Learning Flags* series. Mixed textiles (sewn), vinyl paint. Courtesy of Chto Delat and KOW, Berlin | Madrid.

—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 they don’t acknowledge them.”

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### 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 3<sup>rd</sup> train out of Delhi. The 4<sup>th</sup> got massacred. Shuddha of Raqs Media Collective took my father around the Ansari neighborhoods of the 40’s: Karol Bagh, Pahar Ganj, Darya Ganj. Somedays the refugee/immigrant/emigre experience feels unbearable, and you can do something about it, so I did not accompany them, though I was in Delhi at the time. I was once asked by CBP in Buffalo, judging from the visas on my passport, if I desired to live in India. I said, “I have many desires. Thousands,” I remembered to think in Urdu. “New York will always be one.”

Shuddha had previously taken me around New Delhi, as well all the cities of Delhi past. We began from the ridge and Civil Lines, first showing me Salman Rushdie’s father’s house, to spark off a conversation about the 80’s, when we lived a partitioned existence, him

and I and Rushdie, though we have so much in common. I told him I had seen Rushdie’s mother’s house in Karachi, when a photograph of it was maliciously splashed across the front page of a newspaper at the time of Khomeinei’s fatwa against *The Satanic Verses* in 1989. Next, we went to the shrine of my family’s patron saint, a Jew/Muslim, born and raised Jewish and, if a Muslim in later life, then a blaspheming one. We discussed how Shuddha grew up in Delhi, me in Karachi, and how we don’t know about each other because of the border —what a friend he would have already been if there was no border— and the gaps we foresaw in the future of our relationship because of borders. We went to a ubiquitous Mughal ruin and he pointed to a lattice, it’s that pattern that features in the video *Undoing Walls* by Raqs Media Collective, in this exhibition. Across the border from Delhi I have seen similar patterns in Lahore, which has extant Mughal monuments. Shuddha explained, “It’s the universe breathing in and out.” And, well, that’s what borders should be, right? In Raqs’ video the boundary is made of that lattice that lets you breathe.

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.

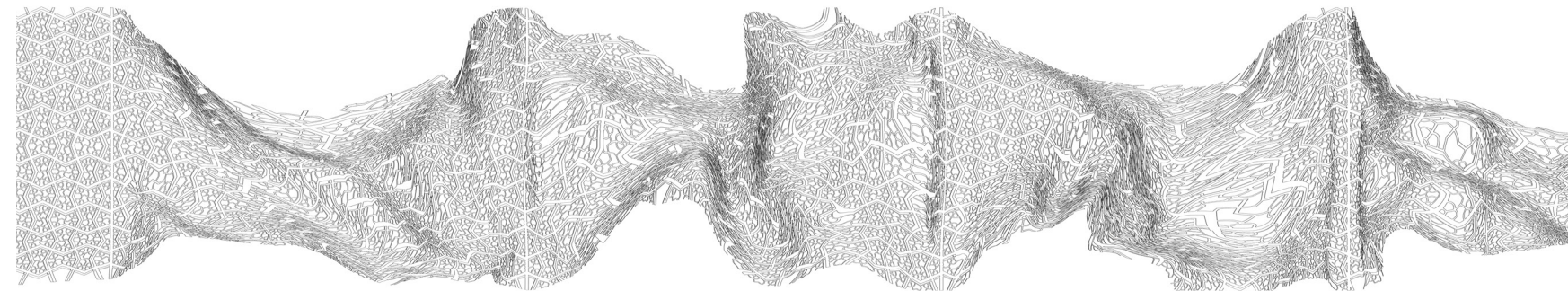
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*Also at the end is hope in protest.*

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 violent criminals.



Chto Delat (realized by Nikolay Oleynikov), *Hunger, Anger, Joy*, 2011. *Learning Flags* series. Mixed textiles (sewn), vinyl paint. Courtesy of Chto Delat and KOW, Berlin | Madrid.



Above: Raqs Media Collective, *Undoing Walls* (detail), 2017. Animation loop. Courtesy of Raqs Media Collective.

Front Cover: Tania Bruguera, *Referendum*, 2016. Still of performance at Union Square New York City, March 6, 2016, 10am to 8pm, in collaboration with the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation. Photograph (detail) courtesy of Charles Rousset.

Back Cover: Mark Wallinger, *Threshold to the Kingdom*, 2000. Video projection, audio. 11:20 min. Film still. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. © Mark Wallinger

This exhibition would not have been possible without research, curatorial, and editorial guidance by George Bolster and Anjali Nanda, installation production by Matt Johnson, and technical support by William Furio. Special thanks to Shelley and Donald Rubin for their commitment to art and social justice.

## THE 8TH FLOOR



The 8th Floor is an exhibition and events space established in 2010 by Shelley and Donald Rubin, dedicated to promoting cultural and philanthropic initiatives and to expanding artistic and cultural accessibility in New York City.

The 8th Floor is located at 17 West 17th Street and is free and open to the public. School groups are encouraged. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 11:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. [The8thFloor.org](http://The8thFloor.org)

### Endnote

1 Barbara Ellison Rosenblit. “David, Bat Sheva, and the Fifty-First Psalm.” *CrossCurrents* 45, no. 3 (1995): 326-40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24460187>.