

The Turner Prize Shortlist 2018: art and activism

Biting wind lashes my face as I head along the high street. Shops flashing red sales disgorge people laden with shopping bags. We're facing Brextinction, stockpiling clothes, foods, medicines, preparing for meltdown. In Pimlico Station, I sidestep a pile of books, a wary dog, neatly folded clothes and an occupied sleeping bag, the zipped quilt dreamed into a concrete bunker. On the radio that morning, a homeless woman spoke about losing her job, applying for benefits and getting evicted before her first payment came. It's too easy to fall to the bottom, she said. Austerity, Brexit, the climate – we're all fucked. Where're the activists when you need them? Well...in the Tate Britain and just about every other gallery in town.

The so-called chill-out lobby for the 2018 Turner Prize shortlist looks like a waiting room for a pharmaceutical firm. The lab white coffee table is splayed with several political books written or admired by the artists: *Hollow Land – Israel's Architecture of Occupation*; *Back to Black: Retelling Black Radicalism*; *The Extreme Centre – A Warning*, a few being closely read by art goers relaxing on the Swedish grey sofas. The all-film shortlist, and the length of some of the films, is striking – a combined watch time of 4.5 hours. The wall sheets of text detailing each of the four shortlisted artists and their films, what they mean and why they exist makes me want to punch myself like Paul McCarthy does in his video *Rocky* (1976). There's a fighting chance that I'll come out of this with a migraine. I need to try, I tell myself; I need to make an effort.

I scan the text and head into Forensic Architectures' exhibit. A darkened room has a large screen showing *Killing in Umm al-Hiran 18 January 2017*, one of two film/investigations presented as *The Long Duration of a Split Second*. 'Investigation I: The Four Shots' is the first of three parts. The deadpan voice begins 'On the day of the incident...' and I'm drawn into a bedtime story ('Once upon a time...'). The parallel persists. The female narrator's voice is even and rhythmic and every minutiae of visual evidence is steadily talked through, graphically displayed, visually underlined. The hypnotic quality in the unceasing narrative carries me through the plot. Police thermal imaging taken from a helicopter, annotated and edited, conveys the official line that this was a terrorist attack. This is contradicted by unedited thermal aerial footage. Using graphic pointers and captioned words, the narrator explains, like Dr Seuss, that these are houses (Houses), these are people (People), these are trees (Trees), this is the Abu Al-Qi'an's vehicle (Vehicle) and this is smoke from a gunshot (Gunshot)... the punchline resonates. The film cuts to multiple screens showing ground level footage taken by an activist from ActiveStills, who collaborated in the investigation. The case unfolds. This footage is synchronised with the thermal police footage, and run backward and forward, replete with comic-like rewind voices and sounds. Meta data statistics are displayed and we are narrated through the use of timelines to uncover gunshot events. The measured voice and forensic content has the allure of true crime: '...at five-fifty-six and six seconds...', '...25 frames per second...', '...shots 1, 3 and 4...'. The final film 'Investigation III: The Re-enactment' combines the gamut of forensic technology with an on-the-ground re-enactment using local villagers and other witnesses to the actual event. The incline of the land suggests that the car rolled rather than accelerated. Case closed.

The group behind the exhibit describe themselves as a multi-disciplinary research agency and in the next room the forensic tools are displayed – architectural models, wall graphics, images, text. These reveal something of the processes behind the work whose goal is to uncover the truth of these events and present the evidence to judicial bodies like the European Court of Human Rights.

The meticulous narration, activist and thermal footage, 3-D models and overlays are both fascinating and sleep inducing. The materiality of the models and the forensic images, abstracted and scored by colour coded statistical analysis also has the allure of weird science, but I have to work hard to feel anything other than admiration for what this agency does. Their interest in the physical environment and what it can reveal through architectural methods is effective as a means to uncover injustices. But I can't escape the fact that this is an exhibit in the legal sense, part of a larger investigation into a politically motivated act. Above all else, I'm hamstrung by the binary politics. This is great design but how's it art?

As I retreat to the chill-out lobby, I remind myself of the rationale for the Turner Prize: to 'honour a commitment by contemporary artists to new developments in contemporary art.' In this case, the new development must be presenting oppositional politics through the exploitation of technology, multi disciplines, mainstream media and street level media networks generated by the Internet ...

When Forensic Architecture exhibited *Counter Investigations* at the ICA earlier in 2018 doubts were raised about the usefulness of turning activism into art, encapsulated by Guy Debord's revolutionary project back in the sixties. In his *The Society of the Spectacle*, without radical strategies, culture, time and life is ultimately commodified into a highly mediated capitalist spectacle. The risk of trivialising moral or political acts is levelled at activists who present action directed at improving the status quo as art (in or out of galleries). Indeed interviews with Forensic Architecture have highlighted their own ambivalence about being shortlisted in the Turner Prize – in one court case their evidence was dismissed by a German Christian Democrat as being from 'an artist group' – not to be taken seriously. Casting art as a pastime for an elite, a luxury perhaps, is often asserted by art activists themselves. Their desire to democratise the means of art production – take art out of the hands of the mainstream and use it to break down the capitalist art complex – is played out through actions and interventions.

These thoughts follow me into the next Turner shortlisted work – Luke Willis Thompson's giant filmed portraits gaze at us or gaze down, guileless and proud. Inspired by Black Lives Matter and Andy Warhol's Screen Tests, Thompson has faced criticism about using well-known victims of racial crime as his subjects; although he does not identify the people directly, the commentary is ubiquitous. For me, even the voyeuristic edge is too soft, the premise thin, the weight of history of the subjects weakening rather than elevating the work.

Charlotte Prodger's work *Bridget* is the winner of the 2018 Turner Prize. Her personal iPhone footage wanders from train views of the epic Scottish landscape, to ships at sea, through to the inside of her home, feet up. The whimsical narration, spoken in a soft Scottish lilt, follows ancient variations of the name Bridget to anecdotes about her life as a care assistant and about being mistaken for a man. The exploration of mis identity, agency and cultural appropriation of queer aesthetics is dynamic rather than didactic, aesthetic rather than activist.

Art as a political tool is hardly new. Take the moral concerns behind Goya's *The Third of May 1808* and his *Disasters of War* series (1810–20) without which, Robert Hughes suggested, we wouldn't have had Manet's *Execution of Maximilian* (1868–69) and Picasso's *Guernica* (1937); and the revolutionary drive behind Malevich's *Black Square* and the supremacist movement; and, in the 1960s, the art interventions of the Situationists as offshoots of Surrealism and Dadaism.

Unlike their historical counterparts, art activists today connect and organise through the Internet. Bad news too is broadcast through a thousand channels, creating a

groundswell of opposition to hierarchies, the rural/urban divide and cultural and social inequities in the mainstream art system. Small galleries and cooperatives run by local and often disfranchised artists and groups spring up and mesh with more high profile movements like Black Lives Matter, #Me Too and Extinction Rebellion. The success of art activists translates to gaining grants, winning prizes and getting noticed, which ultimately sees them subsumed into gallery spaces like the Tate Britain and the Tate Modern, now showing art activist Tania Bruguera's Turbine Hall commission about mass migration, migrant deaths and the status of migrants. Is their success evidence of their failure? Are they undermined by the arts complex and corporate sponsorship? (Hyundai Motors, sponsors of the Turbine Hall commissions, just signed a deal to open a huge low wage assembly plant in southwest Korea). On the other side of this equation are curators who, in cash-strapped times, are adopting the same attitude; much like Debord's passive consumer, they pedal for what is (ironically perhaps) fast becoming the status quo, which is art activism, and cry isn't it time that artists grappled with *real* world problems?! What use is art, after all?!

I settle in for the 90-minute fiction film *Tripoli Cancelled*, one of two films that got Naeem Mohaiemen shortlisted in the Turner Prize. A well-dressed man walks through the wide empty transit lounges and hallways of a dilapidated abandoned airport, later revealed to be Ellinikon International Airport in Athens. Driving trance music underscores the man's resolve, his state of limbo in its tenth year. He exits the building and paces the abandoned tarmac, his solitary figure in what appears to be self-imposed exile is tragically comical yet reassuring against the wide scope emptiness. The man's daily rituals – walking, smoking cigarettes, writing letters to his wife, talking on a disconnected phone, shaving – are absurd and poignant in this vacuum where time stands still. The slow rhythmic pacing and fictive narration to an imagined receiver is captivating, the pathos of the man's isolation made starker by the counting of years that have passed in days (day 3753...) and information boards with perpetually held flights to London and Paris, as if they too have ceased to exist. Above all, his playfulness as he pretends to fly a derelict helicopter, dresses shop mannequins on board an eternally grounded plane, reads *Watership Down*, a kids' book about warring rabbits, and dances to Boney M's *Rivers of Babylon*, captures a child-like innocence and expresses an essentially human vulnerability.

The power of *Tripoli Cancelled* lies in its apprehension of a never-ending failed state and, in this, it creates a space to experience loss and, in this, to drive the creative endeavour. It presages no hope, no utopia – nothing but an acute observation of yearning and persistence. Now that my faith in the power of art has been restored, I can leave the Tate Gallery a little bit richer than when I arrived. I conclude that the question of what constitutes art practice is as circular as the commentary itself – using art as a political tool to legitimise art, but in doing so trivialising the politics and therefore not legitimising art, after all. Like Beckett's chess game in the mental hospital in his novel *Murphy*, the pieces move in and out in an eternal dance.

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