



## Review: Zero Tolerance

Gemma Sharpe

The miscellaneous historical, formal and geographical range of *Zero Tolerance*—a survey of activist projects within contemporary art between the 1960s and the present—has been roundly slated by critics, despite the relative strength of the work included. Given that the exhibition's hook was resistance to authority, its unanchored curatorial approach could have looked like an egalitarian gesture. However, *Zero Tolerance* was both too big and too small to fulfill such a gesture—too amorphous to attend to affinities between works but too small to avoid the production of fatal gaps within its framework. Despite a stellar roster of artists, from Francis Alys, Öyvind Fahlström, and ACT UP New York to Song Dong and Sharon Hayes, the exhibition's miscellaneous nature performed a peculiar violence to its content; every piece became an outlier against the rest, establishing detachments instead of establishing kinship or solidarity.

The outsourced muteness of Rirkrit Tirivanija's *Demonstration Drawings* (2008) and the ambivalent narrativising of Harun Farocki and Andrei Uijca's found footage documentary *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992) offered poignant re-presentations of protest and revolution. But both works appeared languidly disengaged when compared to pieces by Pussy Riot or Ahmed Basyony, for example, artists who, with tragic consequences, have confronted the very real dangers of direct action. The potency of Tirivanija and Faroki/Uijca's work was put into backslide by comparison to these more forthright forms of activism, while the effectiveness of Pussy Riot's and Basyony's work as *art* conversely began to crumble in the face of more cerebral and analytical examples of political art practice.

This mutual antipathy was compounded by the exhibition's treatment of history. Joseph Beuys's *Democracy is Merry* (1973) and Yoko Ono and John Lennon's *Bed Peace* (1969), for example, extended the exhibition's historical timeline but also became outliers because of their temporal displacement. Indeed, the timeliness of *Zero Tolerance* was a central issue. In an interview with The Creators Project,<sup>1</sup> curator Klaus Biesenbach noted that *Zero Tolerance* was conceived roughly three years ago—putting the inception of this show in the year that the “Arab Spring” began to escalate, that Pussy Riot and Ai Weiwei were arrested in Russia and China, and that Jack Persekian was sacked from his position at the Sharjah Biennial, among other petition-arousing conflicts that “shook” the art world. In the very summer of 2011 Okwui Enwezor would write in *Artforum* that the art world's response to these events was “decidedly autumnal,” a blinkered and culturally patronizing wake-up that was *already* belated then.<sup>2</sup> It is no surprise, then, that *Zero Tolerance* had an odd sense of time. Representing an exhibitionary addition to the petitions of 2011, it also attested to how much PS1 struggles to fulfil its mandate as the more nimble and “contemporary” partner to the Museum of Modern Art.

But beyond *Zero Tolerance*'s various self-destructive formal oppositions, its liberal "interestedness" was the foundation of its undoing, failing at the very point that it attempted to become an activist gesture in itself. With its rabble-rousing curation and didactic rhetoric, the exhibition's eager need to produce liberal camaraderie and imply that the exhibition was itself a site of protest had a dangerously colonizing effect, an effect further emphasized by its recourse, in the show's very title, to New York's "zero tolerance" policies of the 1990s. *Zero Tolerance* reiterated *par excellence* the lack of cultural and geopolitical complexity for which Enwezor reproached the petitions that circulated in 2011, knocking at the door of the trauma of others in order to bear witness to that trauma, swell with the warmth of "understanding," and then move calmly on.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Klaus Biesenbach interviewed by Hannah Stamler, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014.  
<http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/blog/klaus-biesenbach-on-zero-tolerance>

<sup>2</sup> Okwui Enwezor, 'Spring Rain', *Artforum*, (Summer 2011), p75.