

TEMPORARY

Enacting Stillness at The 8th Floor

By Hannah Spears

November 11, 2016

<http://temporaryartreview.com/enacting-stillness-at-the-8th-floor/>



Kimsooja. "A Homeless Woman – Cairo (still)" 2001. In "Enacting Stillness" curated by Sara Reisman, 2016. The 8th Floor, New York. Photo: Courtesy Kimsooja Studio.

Enacting Stillness, currently on view at The 8th Floor in New York, consists of sixteen artists from across the globe, who deploy an equally broad range of artistic methodologies. Curated by Sara Reisman, artistic director of the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation's Art and Social Justice Initiative, the exhibition closely adheres to that organization's mission.

Enacting Stillness surveys instances in which artists have deployed or invoked stillness as a radical political gesture or conceptual framework. The first line of text on the gallery wall states that the exhibition “considers the political potential of slowing down and stopping as forms of resistance, protest, and refusal.” And while this theme is more apparent in some works than in others, the end result is a thorough, multivalent inquiry into modes of political resistance in art.

What is perhaps not so apparent in the exhibition is the call for stillness – the explicit urgency, political or otherwise, that warrants stillness as a response. This weakens its overall impact and the strength of its argument. Through gallery mediation, it is possible to discern the particular conditions to which each piece responds, but these conditions all appear disparate, specific to their own time, place, and/or history. What then emerges as the only constant among all the variables is the body as, on one hand, the site of oppression, and on the other, the site of resistance to oppression.

Carlos Martiel and Clifford Owens are particularly assertive in their positioning of the body as a site of oppression. In most all of Martiel’s durational performances, his body remains inert, enduring some choreographed affliction. Photographs from two of his performances hang in the gallery. One photograph documenting *Expulsion* (2015), made for the 4th Thessaloniki Performance Festival, depicts the artist standing, facing the camera with twelve fabric stars, referencing the flag of the European Union, stitched to his otherwise bare skin. Similarly, in a video of Clifford Owens’s performance, *Anthology (Maren Hassinger)* (2011), the artist remains passive as audience members maneuver the dead weight of his torso and limbs into various positions. The artists perform stillness and inertia to expose their susceptibility to and powerlessness against forces of oppression. Other works in the exhibition utilize the body as a means of resisting systems of oppression. Kimsooja’s work is a prime example. In her video performance, *A Homeless Woman – Cairo* (2001), she lies motionless on a city street, her back to the camera. As people gather around her, visibly perplexed, it becomes apparent how effective her gesture is as a means of protest in its ability to disrupt social order. Bruce Nauman’s short film, *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance)* (1967-68) likewise protests dominant social structures. But instead of stillness, Nauman enacts pointless repetition to undermine liberal

capitalist notions of linear progress and efficiency.

Joan Jonas's film, *Songdelay* (1973) is similar to Nauman's video in that the performers' actions are illogical or unproductive. In light of queer theorist Emily Roysdon's nearby piece, *Ecstatic Resistance (schema)* (2009), which illustrates her research towards "a positionality of the impossible as a viable and creative subjectivity that inverts the vernacular of power," a queer theoretical reading of Jonas's film reveals in it a sense of optimism. The performers have no productive purpose in mind, but are guided in their movements by a spirit of inquiry. By experimenting with movement and gesture, they are able to reimagine their relationships to their bodies and material surroundings. Considering post-Fordism's mandate of maximum efficiency, this process of unlearning feels particularly radical.

Enacting Stillness is commendable in its effort to draw connections between a wide variety of cultures, practices, and histories. It attends to the specificity of each work and the conditions to which each work responds, though it could be more cohesive in its approach. I appreciate that it doesn't fall into a common tendency to universalize, instead providing a studious and insightful portrayal of particularly promising instances of political protest in art.