

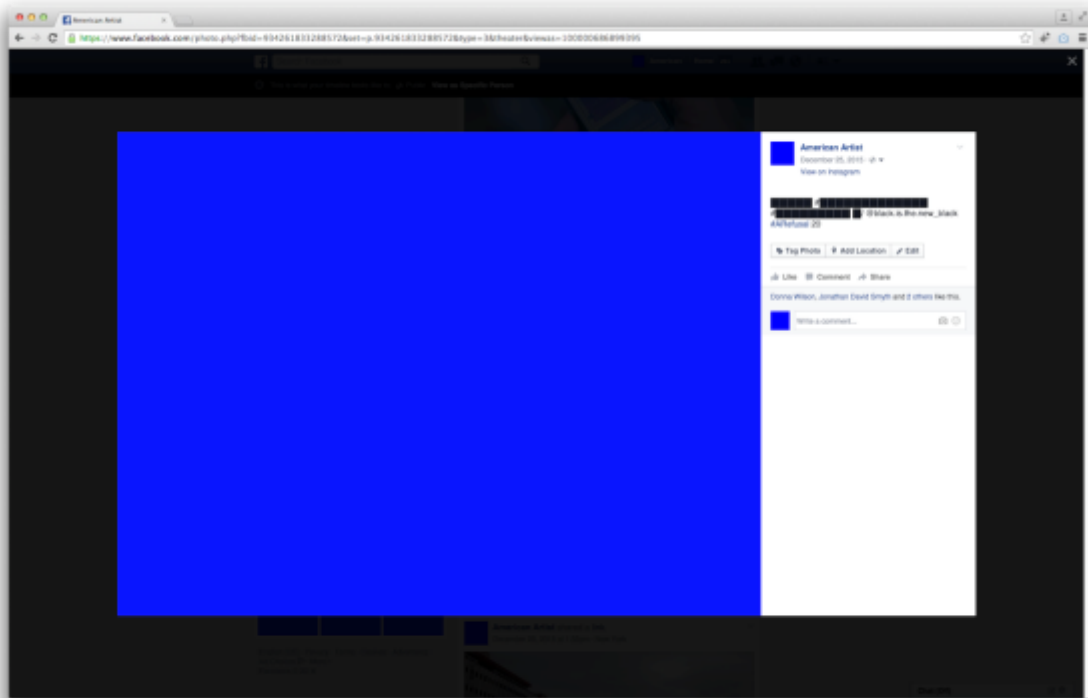
HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES - WEEKEND

I'd Prefer Not To: 'Enacting Stillness' at The 8th Floor

Overall, the work in *Enacting Stillness* suggests that, contrary to some of the grander claims made about art's political efficacy, most art intervenes in the world in a more limited, but no less essential, way.

by Louis Bury on December 10, 2016



Screenshot of "A Refusal" (2015-6), American Artist (courtesy of the artist)

About a year ago, a conspicuously inconspicuous blue rectangle appeared amid the usual procession of selfies, news articles,

status updates, event notifications, and advertisements in my Facebook feed. A shade of blue evocative of Microsoft Windows, the monochrome rectangle, surrounded by a welter of words and images competing for my attention, stood out for its soothing and unassuming homogeneity. The rectangle's contents, such as they were, did not seek to promote a product or a person, argue a viewpoint or an idea, or impress or charm its poster's friends and acquaintances. It was, instead, a visual palette cleanser, a refreshing and modest spoonful of sorbet for the overworked Internet eyes.

The rectangle was part of a project, "A Refusal," by the early career artist who goes by the deliberately overdetermined name of American Artist. For a period of one year, American posted blue rectangles to his Facebook page in lieu of the photographs he would ordinarily post; the text portion of his status updates was similarly redacted, crossed out in black and unreadable. Viewers, an artist's statement explained, could only see the actual, un-blue images by arranging to meet the artist in person. This gesture struck me not only for its monastic integrity but also for the humility of its ambitions. As an act of nonconformist withdrawal in the tradition of Thoreau and Melville's *Bartleby*, American's refusal operates in the more obscure precincts of art's overheated promotional economy. It wasn't impossible that "A Refusal" might receive publicity which could then be parlayed into some measure of notoriety for the artist, but the project's very nature, retiring and ingenuous, made such an outcome unlikely, and beside the point.



Installation view of “Enacting Stillness” (2016), at the Eighth Floor, New York
(photo by Jean Vong)

At The 8th Floor, curator Sara Reisman, former director of New York City’s Percent for Art program, has put together a compelling and well-conceived survey of past and present performance art that poses a related set of questions. How, the show asks might a modest, almost unnoticeable, artistic gesture nonetheless constitute a form of social and political engagement that ripples outward — poignantly, evocatively — into the larger world? The show’s title, *Enacting Stillness*, hints at the paradoxical tension inherent in such a question. Overall, the work in the show suggests that, contrary to some of the grander claims made about art’s political efficacy, most art intervenes in the world in a more limited, but no less essential, way.

Enacting Stillness, thoughtful and soft-spoken, includes a

satisfying mix of performance videos and material documentation by performance-art pioneers such as Joan Jonas, Kirsten Justesen, and John Ahearn, as well as more recent practitioners such as Clifford Owens, Nicolás Dumit Estévez, and Emily Roysdon. From a side room, the faintly audible industrial clangs of Bruce Nauman's 1967-8 video "Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance)" function as the show's metronomic heartbeat. Like the posed dancers in the photographs from Brendan Fernandes' 2012 "The Working Move," much of the work here exists in a state of tensed inaction.

The titular question of Kameelah Janan Rasheed's 2016 "How Long?" which plays off a well-known quote by Martin Luther King, Jr. about the injustice of being told to wait for justice, places questions of art's political efficacy in the fore. "How Long?" resembles Rasheed's other black-and-white wall text assemblages that have been appearing throughout the city over the past year or two. The assemblages cobble together found images, objects, and texts in a process that turns museum and gallery walls into sprawling scrapbook meditations on blackness. "How Long?" reflects this stylistic template but looks more languorous and subdued, less busy, than Rasheed's typical, many-headed hydras: just four picture frames, two of them near-monochrome, which stretch and distort the words of King and others. The multiple competing vectors of activity characteristic of Rasheed's assemblages have been distilled down, like a reduced sauce, into the concentrated linguistic whorl of a small handful picture frames.



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(photo by Jean Vong)

Yoko Inoue’s 2006-2016 “Transmigration of the SOLD” is similarly unassuming and concentrated. For the ongoing performance, Inoue sets up a vendor’s stall on Canal Street in New York City’s Chinatown where it appears she is in the process of making and selling knitwear containing an image of the American flag. Upon closer inspection, however, it turns out she is not knitting or selling the sweaters but unravelling them. This defamiliarizing move not only confronts the potential customer with a portion of the otherwise occluded history of the product’s materials and labor but also constitutes a gesture of artistic self-effacement that could stand as an allegory for the nature of performance art. Just as the sweaters disappear from view, leaving behind only unformed yarn as their trace, so too do live performances vanish — transmigrate — into their documentary afterlives.

I began to draft the above review in the week before the United States Presidential election, then put it aside to do one last round of Get Out the Vote work in Reading, Pennsylvania, where I had been volunteering in the months prior. Overconfident in the polls that showed Hillary Clinton ahead, I assumed, without much thought otherwise, that I'd resume the review when the distraction of the election had passed and life resumed as normal.

But the election's outcome and immediate aftermath makes it difficult, for citizens with even a shred of decency, conscience, and historical sense, to resume, carefree, business as usual. I still want to complete the review, still want to think through what these artworks have to tell us about the intersection of art and politics, but, in these early weeks after the election, it feels, to me at least, somehow ridiculous, disproportionate in scale, to resume doing so in exactly the way I would have beforehand.

Canvassing is performance art minus the art context. You mule along from doorstep to doorstep in a feat of minor, self-elected physical exertion about which most of the world remains indifferent or unaware. At its most discouraging, it can feel like you're trying to relocate an entire beach one grain of sand at a time. And yet, even though you're unlikely to reach, literally or figuratively, most of the people on whose doors you knock, when you do connect with someone it can only happen because you made the effort to show up in person. As in performance, your body— earnest-eyed, humble, and mostly ineffectual — is the vessel that makes brief communion possible.



Installation view of "Enacting Stillness" (2016), at the Eighth Floor, New York
(photo by Jean Vong)

The performance works that comprise *Enacting Stillness* depend on similar feats of modest corporeal proffering. On one video screen ("Anthology (Maren Hassinger)," 2011), we see audience members manipulate and reposition Clifford Owens' naked and passive black body across the space of a large white rectangle on the floor. On another screen ("A Homeless Woman (Cairo)," 2001), Kimsooja lies inert on the ground in a city plaza, ringed round by a throng of curious and amused onlookers. On yet another ("An Auto-Ethnographic Study: The Bronx," 2008), Alicia

Grullón engages Bronx pedestrians in discussions about gentrification while wearing a newspaper papier-mâché mask unnervingly redolent of Hannibal Lecter. Each of these performance gestures constitutes a tiny act of bodily resistance whose efficacy depends precisely on its smallness.

In his cult classic 1936 novella, *Interlinear to Cabeza de Vaca*, Haniel Long poetically reimagines the travel narrative of the eponymous Spanish colonial explorer. “The moment one accosts a stranger or is accosted by him,” Long’s fictional de Vaca muses, “is above all in this life the moment of drama.” Performances such as Owens’s, Kimsooja’s, and Grullón’s confront the strangers who comprise their unsuspecting audiences with the miniature drama of such an encounter. As with canvassing, these performances are by nature limited — local — in reach. You had to have been there, face-to-face with performers risking their and your discomfort, for their unpredictable magic to transpire.

Despite the fact that almost all commentators on political art warn against the simplistic equation of a work’s political contents with its politics, much of the language critics use to describe art’s political dimension hinges precisely on the way in which that work’s content critiques hegemonic power structures. It’s true that you need to be able to point toward and name a political problem in order to apprehend and address it, but the works in *Enacting Stillness* model a form of political engagement that depends less on content-based critique than on the power of singular experiences. Face-to-face with a compelling, perhaps unusual performance, unexpectedly presented with a quotidian blue rectangle in your Facebook feed, you begin to recognize other possibilities for how the world might be ordered and experienced.



Carlos Martiel, "Maze" (2016), (photo by William Furio)

Carlos Martiel's October 19th performance, "Maze," part of an extensive program of original performances presented in conjunction with *Enacting Stillness*, illustrates the limitations of art as political critique and the power of art as indirect political experience. For the performance, Martiel, a black, Cuban artist, stood naked and still atop a swastika shaped platform while two white workmen installed a series of vertical white walls around the swastika's perimeter, penning Martiel inside. With its swastika twists, the completed structure looked like a miniature crop maze home-assembled from Ikea.

The contents of the performance's political critique were obvious: that the U.S. prison system disproportionately incarcerates African-American and Latino men; and that the white-walled art gallery, rather than just a space for reverential display, can also be understood as a metaphorical prison that entraps artists and their work inside. The systemic and existential conditions that underlie these points are distressing at best and outright unjust at worst, but the performance itself can't level its critiques against such conditions with the nuance and sophistication of, say, a book about the prison system such as Michelle Alexander's 2010 *The New Jim Crow*.

What the performance can do, however, with perhaps greater effectiveness than any abstract critique, is allow the audience to feel that critique's visceral, lived force. As an experience, therefore, "Maze" was powerful and uncomfortable in a politically productive way. Because the predominantly white audience could walk and sit around the entire 360-degree space of the platform, they not only watched Martiel become entombed in his metaphoric prison, they also watched each other watching the spectacle. In other words, the performance forced audience members, of whatever race, to confront, in an immediate, experiential way, their complicity as bystanders to the scene — and, by implication, to the atrocities of the larger U.S. prison system.



Installation view of "Enacting Stillness" (2016), at the Eighth Floor, New York
(photo by Jean Vong)

At a time when the liberal and leftist presses are warning about the dangers of our President-elect's autocratic tendencies, performative stillness may seem a Cagney luxury we can no

longer afford. Action now seems the order of the day. But *Enacting Stillness* illustrates how, just as John Cage's experiments in silence can sharpen our sense of sound, artistic experiments in stillness and passivity can sharpen our sense of purpose when it comes time to act. Saying no, opting out, slowing things down, making gestures of refusal: all represent modes of doing that can be efficacious in their own roundabout ways. Through its alert and engaged programming, *The 8th Floor* highlights one strain of work we need as much as ever right now: modest, ambitious, conscientious, and committed, however long the road ahead.