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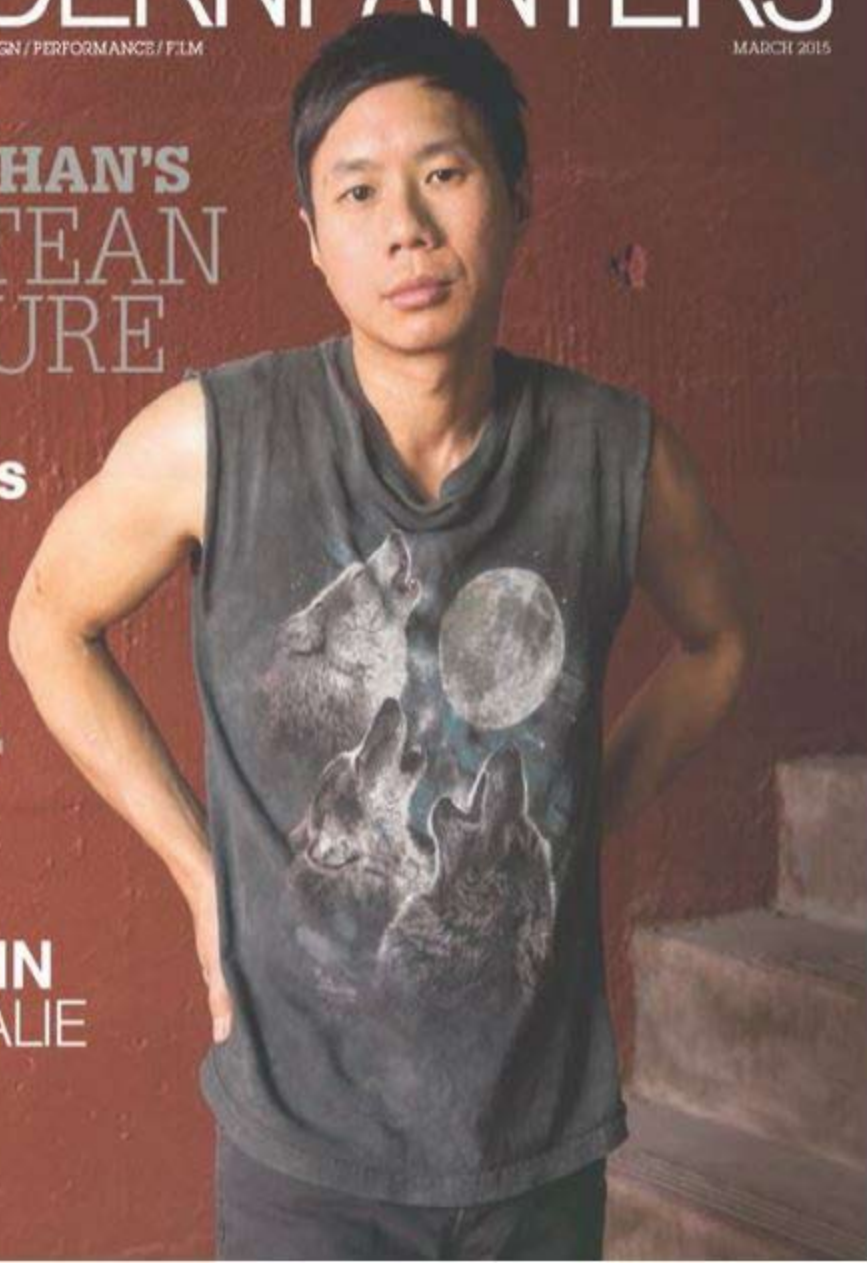
MARCH 2015

## PAUL CHAN'S PROTEAN NATURE

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# "Zero Tolerance" Brings Protest Art to PS1

BY CHLOE WYMA, MODERN PAINTERS | FEBRUARY 21, 2015



A reproduction screen print of Joseph Beuys's "Democracy is Merry (Demokratie ist lustig)" 1973/2014.  
(© 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn)



Song Dong's "Breathing" 1996.  
Courtesy the artist and Pace  
Beijing

Named after the program of aggressive enforcement implemented by police commissioner Bill Bratton under former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani, "Zero Tolerance," on view at MoMA PS1 until March 8th, aspires to convey the immediacy of public protest in a museum exhibition, a challenge it carries out with varied success. Surveying artistic interventions against the oppressive regulation of public space, curator Klaus Biesenbach has compiled a mixed bag of activist-oriented art from around the world, from a video of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's "Bed Peace" protest in 1969 against the Vietnam War to Halil Altindere's music video *Wonderland*, 2013, featuring the hip-hop group Tahribad-1 Isyan's invective against the gentrification of its Istanbul neighborhood.

The show claims the realism of documentary video — with its appeals to raw authenticity — as the privileged medium of socially engaged art. The work on view ranges from righteous expressions of political outrage to long-faced exercises in political correctness. In the former camp, Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica's *Videograms of a Revolution*, 1992, a moving feature-length documentary crafted from footage of the public demonstrations leading up to the overthrow of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, speaks to the power of images to record but also to intervene in history. During the uprising, protesters occupied the government-controlled television studio, broadcasting the ongoing revolution. Displayed opposite Pussy Riot's music video "Punk Prayer: Mother of God, Chase Putin Away," staged in 2012 in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the gripping video *Operation Kiss Garbage* shows female members



of the Russian street-art group Voina spontaneously kissing policewomen in an irreverent confrontation of homophobia and police brutality in 2011. Another highlight is Lorraine O'Grady's exuberant series of photographs of the 1983 African American Day Parade in Harlem, where the artist and a group of dancers surrounded revelers and policemen with gold picture frames, playfully bracketing them as living works of art.



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At other moments, however, “Zero Tolerance” reduces protest to platitude. A number of works, all dating from before the Arab Spring and Occupy movements harnessed the mediated image of protest, employ the trope of “simulated protest,” ventriloquizing the gesture of activism while evacuating it of actual political content. In Sharon Hayes’s wan series of photographs, the artist stands on a street corner holding signs emblazoned with elliptical statements like “Organize or Starve” or “When Is This Going to End?” In Amal Kenawy’s 2009 video *Silence of Sheep*, the artist herds volunteers and hired day laborers as they crawl on their hands and knees across a major Cairo intersection as an ambiguous commentary on powerlessness and conformity. Replacing protest signs with mirrors, a group of performers in Mircea Cantor’s *The Landscape Is Changing*, 2004, march through the streets of the Albanian capital of Tirana, remaking public demonstration into a cynical

thesis on the “futility of protest.” Contemporary art, the artist Hassan Khan has observed, seizes upon “the image of the crowd” as a symbol of “art’s immediacy and engagement with the public sphere.” Artur Zmijewski’s video installation *Democracies*, 2009, manifests this crowd fetish, juxtaposing footage from a variety of public events into a cacophonous aggregate of visual and aural static. A memorial for children killed in a school shooting in Germany, an anti-nato demonstration in Salzburg, the funeral of Austrian right-wing politician Jörg Haider, Zionist and pro-Palestinian rallies, and the public buffooneries of drunken football fans are looped on 20 video screens and played at equal volume in a gesture of nulling pluralism.

In the 1990s, Bratton and Giuliani’s zero-tolerance policy effectively targeted the urban poor in an effort to clean up the streets and accommodate the gentrification and privatization of the city. In light of the eruption of protests over the recent spate of killings by an overzealous police force, the battle over public space is as urgent as ever. When stacked against the exigencies of current politics, the aestheticized activism of “Zero Tolerance” cannot help but feel rather impotent. Despite much strong work on view, the exhibition is a sobering reminder of the limits of art activism and the need for intervention beyond the museum.

*A version of this article appears in the March 2015 issue of Modern Painters.*