

Contributors

Lawrence Abu Hamdan
Council (Grégory Castéra
and Sandra Terdjman)

Christoph Cox

Joshua Craze

ESTAR(SER)

Lauren van Haaften-Schick

Pablo Helguera

AJ Hudspeth

Naeem Mohaiemen

Seeta Peña Gangadharan

Laurie Jo Reynolds

Beatriz Santiago Muñoz

Robert Sember (Ultra-red)

Kade L Twist (Postcommodity)

Edited by Anne Barlow

RRP £16.95 / \$19.95

ISBN 9781910433577



art design fashion
history photography
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www.blackdogonline.com london uk



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What Now? The Politics of Listening

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What we mean when we ask permission

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“ I have been thinking recently about what happens when we collect the stories of others. What are our responsibilities toward an assumption of the felicity of transmission; the move from experiencing to recounting?

The Young Man Was is a project about the slow decline of a certain form of utopian longing, embedded in a revolutionary left project. For this work, I spend a lot of time with older men, often at a stage of semi-retirement (it is also an exploration of a certain doomed masculinity). This stage in life is when they may be assumed to be in a slight retreat from the world. My interest has been to excavate their stories and bring them into dialogue (at least in my own mind, perhaps not in theirs) with a time that moves forward in unsteady motion.

This dynamic of “rediscovery” carries many contradictions. There are three films in the series so far, and in the newest chapter I encountered someone who was not working from within my structures. He did not look at me and think, “You have come to tell my story, now recreate it however you want.” Rather, he pushed back in a challenging and generative way, which was a very different experience from the previous two films. There was almost a surrender of will in those earlier films: “I have already lived the event, I do not need to shape the story.”

This first clip is from *United Red Army*, a film about the 1977 hijack of Japan Airlines from India to Bangladesh; the film is built from the transcripts of the audio recording of the negotiations.

This is one of the moments when the film turns, and it is also a moment where my version of events and the memory of the hostage negotiator, Air Force chief AG Mahmud, diverge. There were 20 plus hours of negotiation tapes. In the raw transcripts, there is a great deal of content that we could classify as “important”. The Japanese Red Army/JRA had aligned themselves with the PFLP or Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (al-Jabhah al-Sha’biyyah li-Taḥrīr Filasṭīn). This was a secular Marxist-Leninist organisation, the second -largest Palestinian group after the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). On the tapes, the JRA spend a long period with the chief negotiator talking about ways to guarantee that the plane would not get shot down after they leave Bangladesh. The discussion pivots around which countries could be “relied upon” to not allow any other country to shoot down the plane. If you listen to those discussions, it is intensely serious and unrelenting. These moments are what I think the lead negotiator AG Mahmud would consider to be the backbone of history—when two men are talking as “men” (as they think, feel, and enunciate) deciding the course of big events. (Of course much of that masculinist discourse can’t be sustained, as you see in the film).

But the actual sequences I chose were far apart from these moments. The alcohol exchange (“not whisky, not whisky”), as well as the newspaper sequence right before, are almost throwaway moments in the “great history” arc. It’s only about four minutes out of many hours of audio that I had. But I consciously centred it in a particular way in the film. In the screenplay (not written, but selected on the editing panel) it is the turning point. When you watch the film all the way through—it’s 70 minutes long—this moment is an unexpected curve and, when it works, the audience’s mood shifts. They are allowed, I hope, the space to start to smile at the unintentional irony of the moment, and anticipate other twists and contradictions that will follow.





Mahmud did not necessarily agree with these editing decisions; here he is watching the film at his house. I was very nervous that he would watch it all the way through and say, “This film is not the story I remember.” But after watching it, he only said, “This is fine, even though I don’t understand why you put the alcohol sequence in.” There were a few other sequences that he thought was not the “core of history”, but he also accepted the choice.

I have been working through what it means when you make films about a moment that was crucial to the people that were protagonists of the movement. And yet from a distance of 30 years, we are approaching it with some slightly upturned or downturned smiles, some sort of recognition of the heavy ironies of the moment.

And yet, I am not approaching it with cynicism, because my emotional relationship with the revolutionary left possibility is that I did and do think it mattered and continues to matter (even in its long decline). I came of age in the 1990s, at which point much that was at stake had already been resolved (in many cases, sadly and badly). For us, the left was always something that was already in the past. A touch of humour becomes a way to embrace and even care for (and heal) that moment. Humour about this moment doesn’t automatically feel cynical for my generation, but perhaps that is precisely because we don’t carry the scars on our own bodies. But that humour can feel dissonant to a survivor of that same moment, when they encounter the work. I am not sure if I am able to make myself clear entirely. I feel I could be clearer, but I am treading extremely cautiously because I am overly conscious that these are others’ stories, and I am not sure if I have really been given consent to insert ironic notes into their stories.

The second work in this series is *Afsan’s Long Day*. This film is about Afsan Chowdhury, a historian who was the victim of a case of mistaken identity. In 1974, the police were going house to house to find sympathisers with the Maoist underground (or other tendencies, all mixed together and misrecognised). They tried to pick up Chowdhury, thinking that he was involved with an armed faction. His library had parts of the “Marxist pantheon, with old Karl Marx on the cover”, so that was the main evidence for the searchers. Chowdhury, as a survivor, has a very different relationship to this time period from me—very cynical and clear eyed. I recorded his stories, but ended up coming away and making a very different film from what he had expected. This is Afsan watching the film in Dhaka, when it was completed.

In each of these cases, I seem to be approaching the protagonist with trepidation after the work is “finished”.

The document is hardest in the absence of fiction as your distancing device. I wonder if someone will one day say: “I spent so many days talking to you, but all the important moments that I talked about are not here, rather what is in the film are these marginal moments at the very edge of my story—in fact, those were anecdotes I was telling you as I unclipped my microphone, and walked up to the table for lunch, but it seems that marginal anecdote was what drew you in.”

Finally, this is part three (*Last Man in Dhaka Central*), which premiered at the Venice Biennale. It’s the story of Peter Custers, a Dutch activist, journalist, and academic. In 1972 he was a PhD student at Johns Hopkins, but he dropped out of his programme to go to Bangladesh and document

the underground left in a period when it looked likely to take control of the country, in a replay of the Chinese or Cuban revolution (always in the shadow of 1917). Eventually Peter was arrested, and he was in jail for a year until he was released as a result of pressure from the Dutch parliament. The title is an argument against Francis Fukuyama’s *End of History and the Last Man*. It’s also, perhaps, a tertiary link to John Kerry’s famously mordant comment to the Vietnam subcommittee of the US Senate: “How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?”

Of these three men, Peter has been the most invested in the history that he is retelling. Unlike the others, he challenges my storytelling form. He has been involved in the film from the very beginning, and has debated many of my choices. He is someone who continually and steadily asserts the primacy of his own memory and its right to exist without filter.

I think here, there is also something specific about the experience of the revolutionary left in the 1970s, in how that moment and movement, and that time of possibility, is suffused with a sense of sincerity and authenticity—and I don’t put quote marks around those phrases when I’ve used them; it is to inhabit that position with genuine passion.

These three men were willing to give the prime years of their life to a mission—in all three cases, their life was in some ways, altered by their sacrifices, but the promised time did not arrive. It may be unexpected for these protagonists to encounter a relationship of removal from that moment, where we try to insert whimsy or a smile—as a way to turn a moment upside down and have it mean something else. The song lyrics in the opening sequence are from a famous love song from my youth, which I superimposed on top of a phone conversation that Peter is having. He asked me, naturally, “Why is this song relevant to my story?”, and I replied that I think of defeated, frustrated romantic love as a metaphor for the leaving behind that had to happen after he left jail.

Peter argues with me about those kinds of readings. At the same time, he also watches the film repeatedly to sharpen his critique. His comrades have also been to Venice to see the film, and one of them told him that the film was “not very radical”. This tells me something more about a relationship to histories that is not always collective, nor in consensus. We reframe continuously, and yet the people who live those moments may insist that they still have the right to be heard in their own voices, not necessarily in ours.

We regret to inform that Dutch journalist, activist, and academic Peter Custers passed away unexpectedly on 3 September 2015. He was 66 years old. A dedicated friend of Bangladesh, Peter was active until the end of his life. Last month he travelled to Venice to watch *Last Man in Dhaka Central* at the Biennale, and at the time of his passing was planning to travel to Lisbon to be a discussant for the film’s premiere at DocLisboa.

This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services through its grant MA-10-14-0304-14. The views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this series of symposia and corresponding publications do not necessarily represent those of the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

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Black Dog Publishing Limited
10a Acton Street, London WC1X 9NG
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 7713 5097
Fax: +44 (0)20 7713 8682
info@blackdogonline.com
www.blackdogonline.com

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781910433577

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Designed by Sylvia Ugga at Black Dog Publishing.

Black Dog Publishing Limited, London, UK, is an environmentally responsible company. What Now? The Politics of Listening is printed on sustainably sourced paper.



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