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## Lior Shvil's "Protocols": reflections from the "Public Opinion"

Performa 15: Writing Live | by Leah Werier

"Would you let that happen?" Lior Shvil yells passionately, his voice raised over the chaotic scene taking place inside Art in General. The gallery has been transformed for the piece *Protocols*. Open plywood structures fill the space. The structures have moveable parts and pieces: a white strip of fabric becomes a wall, and wooden blocks are made into chairs or drums. The word "Arena" is written across the floor. The gallery is a playground which allows for a cast of non-professional actors to improvise and create: to enact an exercise used in military counter-insurgency training. Audience members explore and walk through the gallery, while others sit on a set of plywood seats. "Public Opinion" is written on the wall above our heads. The fourth wall of theatre is broken: the spectator becomes an active participant in the performance. The setting, like the performance itself calls attention to its construction.

Outfitted in a bright red jumpsuit with the word "Joker" written across his back, Shvil solicits advice from the audience. Before us, a person kneels on the dirty gallery floor, about to be executed by a group of villagers. She is wearing a long sleeved black garment and forcibly held in place by actors dressed in the same shapeless utilitarian work suits, only in white. The soldiers are signified by their black clothing, the civilians are dressed in white. Would we let this person be executed? Should this person be beheaded for their actions that we, as spectator have witnessed? A child in the audience excitedly answers: yes! But not before two members of the "public opinion" are dragged from their seats by actors and made to represent the kneeling soldier in a trial. A soldier whose actions we have observed in the minutes leading to this climactic moment. A soldier that alongside two other actors dressed in black, forcibly came into a village in search of a "man under 40": we are told that he is a suspect, a murderer, a terrorist.

Labels are appended to the actors to signify which character they are playing in the scene. A woman is identified as: widow: she wails and shrieks and throws sand. Hysterical. Unpredictable. Her actions coincide with what counter-insurgency training dictates and what the military expects of certain types of people. There is a diagram on the wall adjacent to the audience, scrawled in chalk against the black paint. The diagram contains a lengthy list of the different characters in the scene, including: man under 40, widow, small child and the corresponding ways that each of these characters may behave in a social situation. Arrows run and criss-cross from character to behavioral traits. Widow→ Hysterical. Widow→ Unpredictable. The title of this list: Relational Dynamics, elucidates this diagrams intention. The performance echoes French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of a similar name—relational aesthetics—wherein human relations and social context become a means for and of artistic experimentation. In *Protocols* the art gallery becomes arena, the spectator becomes performer. The performance is an open ended event where the outcome is undetermined and ultimately governed by the collective. Despite the highly constructed nature of the performance it produces powerful and dizzying affective resonances; As the audience becomes responsible for the outcomes of the scene there are deep psychological implications, for both spectator and performer. Especially so as the performance—involving the narrative of the terrorist—took place on Saturday November 14th, just hours after the terror attacks in Paris. The performances relationality extends beyond the contained category of aesthetics: it is dynamic, and uncontainable. The meaning and outcome of *Protocols* is constantly shifting as it remains in dialogue with the world outside of the gallery walls, a world whose meaning is also constantly shifting in relation to extremely powerful forces of control, media, terrorism and the spectacle.

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