

This Panhandler Is a Poetic Terrorist

EMERGENCY ROOM

MASSA LEMU

PASSAGES FOR THE UNDOCUMENTED

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BY HARBEER SANDHU

WE LIVE IN A TIME OF ACCELERATING CHANGE AND instability. It can also be said that change is the only constant, but with nation-states merging into entities like the European Union, on the one hand, and long simmering “civil” wars that are the legacy of European colonialism splintering nations, on the other hand; with freetrade and borders that are increasingly porous to goods, capital, and human migrants; and with news about all this tumult flooding the 24-hour information stream, we are at least more aware of incessant change than we have ever been before. Solid footing on terra firma is out; surfing liquefied landfill is in.

In this instable context, it is probably foolish to be too sure of anything, and our language reflects these

doubts. We hesitate to speak with self-assuredness. In his poem “Totally like whatever, you know?” Taylor Mali observes, “Invisible question marks and parenthetical (you know?)’s / have been attaching themselves to the ends of our sentences? / Even when those sentences aren’t, like, questions? You know?” Lacking authority and conviction, our simplest declarations end with the upturned inflection of interrogatories.

Right?

Yet, it is in this very same context that homeless people in Houston brave traffic and climate to display their handmade placards declaring, unequivocally, “Will work for food,” and “Disabled vet—anything helps.” It is that medium—a homeless person bearing a short, earnest message on a piece of cardboard—that became Massa Lemu’s means of expression for two years.

Picture, then, a young, clean, able-bodied black man posing with a cardboard sign on a street corner. You have seen this before. You have a word for it, “panhandler,” and the moment your brain applies that word to the person before you, you cease seeing because you are now blinded by your preconceived notions. But this is no ordinary panhandler. This panhandler’s sign reads, “Nihilist in search of tenure.” On another day, it might read, “No fry zones” or “Plot tectonics” or “In pursuit of fulfillment” or “Those who venture there get immunized.” This panhandler is a Poetic Terrorist.

For two years, Lemu, a trained painter and a third-world migrant (“an artist who would probably never get a gallery deal,” he says) stood in busy Houston intersections holding the signs for an audience of motorists. For two years, Lemu turned curbs and sidewalks, medians and crosswalks, into a stage for performance art where he attempted to engage an often unwitting, sometimes unwilling, and always fleeting audience with what anarchist theorist Hakim Bey has called “Poetic Terrorism” or PT:

PT is an act in a Theater of Cruelty which has no

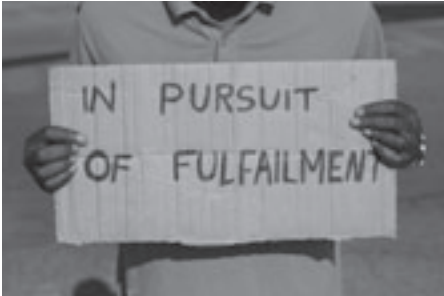
stage, no rows of seats, no tickets & no walls. In order to work at all, PT must categorically be divorced from all conventional structures for art consumption (galleries, publications, media)... Don’t do PT for other artists, do it for people who will not realize (at least for a few moments) that what you have done is art. Avoid recognizable art-categories, avoid politics, don’t stick around to argue, don’t be sentimental.

Though Lemu was unaware of Bey’s essay during the time of his performance, he echoes theories laid out in “Poetic Terrorism.” Lemu describes interactions with motorists who tried to engage him in conversation:

Every attempt for the motorist to ask questions or for me to explain was unsuccessful because of time... Even communication itself was difficult because of the noise. And also you are shouting to somebody who is constantly looking at the lights and their cell phone. Honestly, I never really worried about explaining to the motorists because I knew that was impossible. Explaining was not part of the deal because the work itself plays with communication and meaning. If somebody read it that was enough. If they started asking questions, that was more. But they were not getting answers. There were times when my presence was acknowledged, when I could tell from facial expressions such as puzzlement, a frown, a smile, or laughter that somebody had read my statement. Some people acknowledged my presence by trying to offer

PICTURE, THEN, A YOUNG,
CLEAN, ABLE-BODIED
BLACK MAN POSING WITH
A CARDBOARD SIGN ON A
STREET CORNER.

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a *In Pursuit of Fulfillment*, 2012, performance with cardboard and ink. Photos Logan Beck.

b *Genesis: A Concise History of Malawi*, 2012, performance with cardboard and ink. The sign reads, "In the beginning/there was nothing/then it became/a British Protectorate."

b



me money even when they had not read the statement. There were a lot of averted gazes, too, when people deliberately avoided eye contact with me. The pitiful moments were when people completely shut me out. Those were the moments I felt most invisible. When pressed about his reaction to being offered money, he says:

I realized that that was an awkward moment for the Good Samaritan when I refused the money. But that was also my opportunity to get more noticed in the confusion.

Rather than use the language of the panhandler wholesale, I was interested in the unstable linguistic space between sense and nonsense, not only to say veiled things but also to focus on communication itself and break boundaries of thought.

The homeless, like migrants, occupy a strange liminal space—they are ubiquitous, yet all but invisible. Though they live under the ever-watchful eye of police enforcing city ordinances that criminalize their presence, the broader public prefers to look past or look through them.

Lemu's signs and performances aim to shake motorists awake from what Salman Rushdie calls "the anesthesia of the everyday" by slipping in his subliminal message using a familiar medium and then sideswiping them with a jolt of confusion. There is freedom, he seems to suggest—of thought, of emotion, of perception even—in that confusion. A chance to reconfigure fixed thinking patterns in their fleeting moment of fragmentation upon shattering.

Like a homeless person who has found a temporary shelter for the night, Lemu's ephemeral, temporal *Passages for the Undocumented* performance briefly found a temporary shelter at Rice University's EMERGENCY Room gallery, where it met a different kind of audience and a different kind of gaze than it was used to. Lemu has no plans to bring back this performance.