

# LAW & (DIS)ORDER

Written by Noor Alé and Claudia Mattos

We are living in increasingly volatile times. The recent political uprisings in Bolivia, Chile, Hong Kong, Iraq, Lebanon and other countries have gripped the international imagination. This Global Protest Wave has borne witness to millions of people engaged in acts of resistance and anti-government protest in response to causes from wealth inequality to governmental corruption to the desire for political freedom.<sup>1</sup> Across these demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience, police emerge as common and enduring proxies for the state. Police are a constant in the imagery that circulates news media around these protests: we often see them in riot gear, holding the line, and firing tear gas and pellets to dissipate crowds. What these images reveal is a complex performance of authority that is given form through uniform, gesture, and staging.

**LAW & (DIS)ORDER** is an exhibition that contends with the artifice of authority. Conceived in a climate of heightened attention towards police, police misconduct, and the increasing militarization of law enforcement, the exhibition addresses the social, cultural, and political mechanisms from which state authority is constructed. The represented works by **Halil Altindere**, **Aman Mojadidi**, **Yoshua Okón**, and **Berna Reale** highlight ruptures in the relationships between police and the public they are sworn to serve. Calling attention to abuses of power and corruption in the enforcement of the law, these works highlight the often bureaucratic absurdity and violence of policing.

Parody and satire emerge as critical strategies which Altindere, Mojadidi, Okón, and Reale each employ in different capacities to offer varying points of entry into broad discussions around ethics, power, and the roles of police in the 21st century. In these represented works, humor is used as an improvisational and disruptive device that neither sensationalizes nor trivializes police violence but proposes more accessible terms for understanding these matters.

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<sup>1</sup> "Do today's global protests have anything in common?," BBC, November 11, 2019, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-50123743>.

Symptomatic of the Gezi Park protests, Turkish artist **Halil Altindere's *Wonderland*** (2013) is a collaborative music video for Tahribad-ı İsyân (Rebellion of Destruction), an activist group of Turkish hip-hop artists. Protesting against the government-led and privately-funded gentrification of Sulukule, a predominantly Roma enclave in Istanbul, the young rappers employ music as a weapon of dissent. Their politically-motivated rhymes express anger at the urban development project initiated by TOKİ—the Housing Development Administration—and expose the social inequities endured by Sulukule's Roma community.<sup>2</sup> *Wonderland* centers on a fictional police pursuit of Tahribad-ı İsyân through Sulukule's derelict streets where the young men destroy signs of gentrification and mobilize residents to protest. Influenced by the over-the-top conventions of action movies, a dramatized, violent encounter breaks out between the youth and a policeman; functioning as a cathartic release, this violence speaks to the frustrations of living under the authoritative policies of the Turkish government.<sup>3</sup> *Wonderland* is a dark fantasy where the use of violence foregrounds issues surrounding disenfranchisement, marginalization, and racism endured by minority groups in Turkey at the hands of the state.



In his short film ***Payback*** (2009), Afghan-American artist **Aman Mojadidi** exposes and subverts the systemic corruption that permeates Afghanistan's government and law enforcement. Inspired by the ease with which a group of Taliban insurgents disguised themselves as policemen in an attack on the Afghan capital, Mojadidi procured a police uniform and badge from black market sellers in Kabul's central district and posed as a police officer. The sale of law enforcement paraphernalia—including weapons, ammunition, honor pins, and

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<sup>2</sup> Constanze Letsch, "Turkish Roma make way for property developers in historic Istanbul district," *The Guardian*, November 9, 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/09/sulukule-roma-housing-row-istanbul>.

<sup>3</sup> Jenna Krajeski, "Turkey: Tahribad-i İsyân's Rap Rebellion," *Pulitzer Center*, January 10, 2014, <http://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/turkey-tahribad-i-isyans-rap-rebellion>.



You tell me how much you  
have and I'll tell the officer.

bullet-proof vests—is widespread across these markets.<sup>4</sup> Pointing towards the vulnerabilities of illegal access to these products and their potential for abuse, Mojadidi in his performance walks the streets as a law enforcement officer and sets up a faux checkpoint to search cars. Police checkpoint inspections of this kind are rife with corruption and officers often request payoffs to keep from searching vehicles. As Mojadidi stops drivers at his checkpoint, he pays each 100 Afghanis, roughly \$1.70, the average cost of a police bribe.<sup>5</sup> Inverting this uneasy relationship between police and public, Mojadidi pays a reparation to the people of Kabul who are subjected to the venal practices of local authorities.

In the six-channel work *Orillese a la Orilla* (1999 - 2000), Mexican artist **Yoshua Okón** captures candid, improvisational, and absurd moments where police betray their veneer of authority and give way to displays of incompetence and misconduct. In uniform or on the job, the officers are filmed dancing suggestively with a baton, discussing sexual fantasies over radio, or exchanging strings of insults with Okón. *Poli VI*, the sixth and final installment in this series and shown individually as part of *LAW & (DIS)ORDER*, documents a conflict and eventual resolution between police and the artist. The

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<sup>4</sup> Nissenbaum, Dion, "Reverse bribes dramatize police corruption in Afghanistan," *The Seattle Times*, June 26, 2010, <http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/reverse-bribes-dramatize-police-corruption-in-afghanistan>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

video opens with a scripted scene where three youths, played by Okón's friends, take part in a fictional assault of a police officer; Okón hired a real policeman to participate in the video.<sup>6</sup> Onlookers in neighboring buildings—believing the violence to be real—called authorities to report what appeared to be the mugging of the officer.<sup>7</sup> The video then jumps to a tense confrontation between Okón and the policemen who responded to the scene. Refusing to sympathize with the artist, the officers arrest Okón and place him in the back of a police car. The conversation develops as one officer casually suggests to Okón that he pay a bribe to be released; in the end, the artist pays 100 pesos, or about \$7, for his and his friends' freedom.

Brazilian artist **Berna Reale's *Palomo*** (2012) is a critical reflection on institutional crime, corruption and violence by the Brazilian police. Casting herself as a police officer, Reale patrols the streets of her hometown Belém do Pará—a town that has endured extrajudicial killings by police militias—while riding *Palomo*, a cavalry horse dyed red.<sup>8</sup> In this subversive and unsettling performance, Reale wears a police uniform, bullet-proof vest, and dog muzzle; symbols that denote the state's dominance over its constituents. This subordination is articulated in the bystanders' silence throughout the work, which conveys the fear of a public that is rendered voiceless in the absence of justice. In this critique of the Brazilian police, *Palomo* exposes public safety as a system of unequal exchanges between the public and police, where disobedience results in often severe and unjust repercussions for ordinary citizens. Drawing parallels with the Bible—a text that enforces submission to rules—*Palomo* alludes to the red horseman of the apocalypse, a



<sup>6</sup> "Orillese a la orilla, 1999 - 2000," Yoshua Okón, [http://www.yoshuaokon.com/orillese-a-la-orilla\\_text.html](http://www.yoshuaokon.com/orillese-a-la-orilla_text.html).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Azam Ahmed, "Where the Police Wear Masks and the Bodies Pile Up Fast," *The New York Times*, December 20, 2019, <http://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/world/americas/brazil-police-shootings-murder.html>.

harbinger of judgement who will incite warfare amongst humankind. For Reale, violence in Brazil is an enduring cycle that is perpetuated by the Brazilian government and the police, figures of authority that are at times unable or unwilling to maintain the order they are entrusted to sustain.

An activist ethos courses through the works in *LAW & (DIS)ORDER*, exposing fraught dynamics between various states and their respective publics. Defining these relationships in terms of resistance to police, what each of the artists point to are the systemic and deeply entrenched dysfunctions of authority. Mojadidi and Reale both don uniforms, personifying police to unsettle their façade of power; while Altindere and Okón convey the urgency to resist police in the face of unjust treatment. With critical attention towards state and police violence in the Global South, the works in this exhibition are also broadly connected to ongoing conversations in Canada and the United States around causes such as the Black Lives Matter movement and calls for police reform. *LAW & (DIS)ORDER* brings together international instances of resistance to police, the state, and authorities that might infringe upon political freedoms, revealing the pressing need for populist activism and the democratization of social and political critique during this volatile age.