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An Artist's Duty: 202-456-1111 by Jason Lazarus

January 18, 2019



202-456-1111 by Jason Lazarus, Visual Studies Workshop Press, 2018

Essay by Martha Rosler

Softcover, 8 x 10 inches, 48 pages

Open Edition



Roula Seikaly

In the 1970 Emmy-award winning documentary, *To Be Free*, Nina Simone declares "is to reflect the times." Simone spoke at a moment when matters including race in American cultural life, the reverberations of which we feel and strive to address in arts and political activist—Simone's impassioned statement is expressed as a performance of the number 202-456-1111.

Lazarus lives with arthrogryposis, a muscular and joint disability that limits one's mobility, with which reporter Serge F. Kovalski lives, and for which he was mocked by Trump during the 2015 campaign rally in South Carolina. The artist fairly interpreted Trump's cruel kind of disability. In response, he marshaled his creative process in protest of Trump's presidency. Repeating 202-456-1111 (the White House main phone number) Lazarus created an act of defiance, a call to action, a reminder that access to the nation's highest office was blocked during the government shutdown, the longest in this nation's history, this line was a performance of the number 202-456-1111.

In an email exchange, Lazarus described the creative process as a "production line" in an unoccupied darkroom at the University of South Florida, Lazarus draws the numbers on sheets of paper with chemicals. Lazarus and his assistant then expose each sheet to different light sources, which predictably produce different results. The digits are clearly recognizable when exposed to less light or produced as the degraded chemical bath reaches its peak, numbers slip into abstraction. Lazarus also notes, with measured enthusiasm, that the efforts to separate the stop bath and developing chemicals are abandoned and the process is left to chance. It is, as the artist notes, "fast, dirty, regular and rhythmic—much like good activist work." The final result is a performance of the number 202-456-1111.



202-456-1111 is the culmination of these fast and rhythmic experiments: the inal numbers crowded into the front plane, no depth or perspective permitted. By cc pitch black, the numbers obscured. Even in reproduction, the photograms suggest

in their production. Lazarus' mark-making is generous, almost sloppy, and intentional, offering a meditative state that repetitive tasks offer.

It's a fool's errand to assign artistic intent or meaning, but speculation is fair given that studio work, or the gestural repetition captured in the photograms, offers a context lacks. One could also analogize that these objects (the originals are done for fundraising purposes) represent the darkness through which we are collectively "dreaming of something better," as artist/activist Martha Rosler writes in her poem. We could interpret it as our duty to call, to collaborate, to protest with all available









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