



ARTIST

Matthew Connors

TITLE

Pyongyang

DATE

2013

DIMENSIONS

24 in H x 18 in W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

IMAGE NOTES

25.25"x36" sheet *Do not exhibit before july 2018

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2017.043

CURRENT LOCATION

NA 12

MATTHEW CONNORS

BORN

1976

BIRTHPLACE

Port Washington, New York

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2017

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 208

BIOGRAPHY

Matthew Connors lives and works in Boston, MA and Brooklyn, NY. He received a BA in English Literature from the University of Chicago and a MFA in Photography from Yale University. Since 2004 he has been teaching at the Massachusetts College of Art & Design in Boston where he is a Professor in the Photography Department. His work has been exhibited in galleries and museums worldwide including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; DOX Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague; and the Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York. He has received the MacDowell Colony Fellowship, the Virginia Center for Creative Arts Fellowship, the William Hicks Faculty Fellowship from the Massachusetts College of Art & Design, and the Alice Kimball English Travelling Fellowship from the Yale School of Art. Most recently he was awarded the 2016 ICP Infinity Award for his publication *Fire in Cairo*.

ESSAYS

What does a metaphor rest upon? —Michael Taussig Matthew Connors and I are listening to W.J.T. Mitchell and Michael Taussig talk about monuments and their multi-authored book, *Occupy: Three Essays in Disobedience*. Connors is furiously taking notes, scribbling. It makes sense; he has been laying out his own book, *Fire in Cairo*, on the uprising in Egypt. Also we are in the midst of planning a trip to Cuba to document the end of the Castro era and changes in the country's relationship to monumentality. How could we know then, the two of us, collaborators and friends, so invested in art's intersection with politics, how could we predict such immeasurable changes here in the era of Donald J. Trump? Connors' photographs of the protests since Trump's election are consistent with his overall conceptual and imagistic preoccupations, visible across his oeuvre. So much here reminds of the documentary, of Magnum's Frank Capa, of his brother Cornell Capa whose "concerned photography" used the image for humanitarian aims during post-World War despair. Yet, Connors is not of their ilk. We should find it no coincidence that he admires Donald Barthelme's fiction. Wasn't it Barthelme, writing about literature's aim, who said it "is the creation of a strange object covered with fur which breaks your heart"? These photographs are like this. They are so disconcerting and so tender. Rather than approaching his subjects with narrative intent, Connors settles on the often inexplicable in the crowd. *FUTR 2016* depicts a blonde woman with a \$20 bill glued over her eyes, gold duct tape gagging her lips. How does she see to march? She has Sharpied "Fuck Trump" on the tape. We don't need to hear her rally cry—her lament was made to be pictured. But the strangeness of the image indicates directness was not her goal. A second poignant point about these photographs: Connors likes to introduce the accoutrements of resistance. In *Mask in Reverse 2016*, we see the back of a mask that is a ruler, tape, and wire. The blank white verso of the cut-out faces us. The photograph offers little information about either author or subject. Whose face is on the front? Most likely Trump's face, but it could be anyone. So many crooks in office. The missing face—anonymous and blank—we fill that in from memory. I used to picture Nixon. Cinema trained us this way. Think *Point Break 1991*. I now know it was all previous presidents but I remember only Nixon. Nixon was our presidential bad guy. Will Trump's face in parody ever achieve such ubiquity? Denying us Trump's visage, Connors continues his concentration on the inexplicable. A want of the traditional interaction with the documentary frames his pictures so that entering them derails us. Take for instance *Small Flame 2017*, where a limousine's window becomes the classic Albertian example of the pictorial window onto another world. The fire in the backseat is an abstraction and, as you look in through a pile of jagged, broken glass, you begin to understand its cause. In *Tower Interior 2016*, there is the reflection of lights as you traverse the landscape horizontally. This dystopian vantage point reveals itself in Trump Tower after just one escalator ride. Overall the vulnerability in these images captures the nature of mounting a resistance to corporate and state goliaths. Some moments remind us Connors is there, a presence in the space alongside the protestors. In *Balaclava 2017*, a woman in a cat mask quizzically eyes him. Her eyes seem weary but determined. These cold days deter bodies in the streets, but she is here and has donned a cat mask. How does that mask relate at all to why she is here? Upon what does the cat metaphor rest? This is what we want to know. In this case, there is no metaphor. In this case, the monument is invisible. There are no statues to tear down as we did in our past with Robert E. Lee and other members of the Confederacy. Our targets have become almost inaccessible to crowds. Monuments of steel and glass render such power barely visible and almost impenetrable to human scale. What informs Connors' praxis is making these monuments visible, highlighting the obscured faces, and the illegibility of text. As well as the cars on fire, the fragility of the homemade mask, the shaking hand-written script of the Sharpie—these remind us of invisible and metaphoric slingshots dispersed in crowds. Returning to Barthelme, perhaps that very same strange object may mend our broken hearts. Andrianna Campbell Matthew Connors lives in Brooklyn, NY, and completed his residency at Light Work in June, 2017. Andrianna Campbell is a writer and art historian living in Brooklyn, NY. www.andriannacampbell.com When Matthew Connors first arrived at Zuccotti Park in September of 2011, he had no intention of making photographs. He first gravitated to the congregation of protesters who occupied Manhattan's Financial District out of simple curiosity. But as he observed Occupy Wall Street's "wellspring of generative social organization," he began to wonder how photography could contribute to the historical moment before him. Disturbed by the way that passersby were photographing protesters at a distance, he immersed himself in the activity of the movement and sought to use his camera as a tool of engagement. General Assembly comprises 650 of Connors' portraits that span the first year of OWS in New York City. The exhibition borrows its title from the movement's term for its horizontal decision-making process. He made his portraits in the charged atmosphere of Zuccotti Park, elsewhere in New York City at direct actions, and during more contemplative moments before and after working group meetings. The process of creating the portraits involved lengthy conversations with the participants about their motivations and involvement in the movement. Building on these newly formed relationships, he regularly returned to demonstrations to photograph and offer protestors a print of their portrait. For Connors, this ongoing exchange of images and ideas contributed to the "relational fabric" that Occupy was cultivating. In many of these portraits, the person gazes directly into the camera at the artist—and us—a rare and brave moment of trust and connection. A native New Yorker, Connors had begun to feel that his home was becoming a "city of strangers" pulled apart by gentrification's economic power and frequent disruption. By distributing political power and reaching decisions more equitably, Occupy Wall Street sought to reestablish that community. When we approached Connors early in the new year about exhibiting General Assembly, we had no

inkling of what was about to happen. Now, we prepare this catalog and exhibition as the coronavirus pandemic continues its worldwide march, traveling along the very trade routes of capitalism and globalization that Occupy confronted. The virus has quickly shut down the economies of most countries. Sheltering in place, we've watched the videotaped murder of George Floyd and others in horror. Now as we stand at a crossroad, the skies clear of smog, families navigate lockdown leisure time together and millions participate in Black Lives Matter protests around the world. Many see possibilities for change within death and destruction. The Occupy portraits confront us with a question that has only grown in relevance and urgency: what is our obligation to each other? Connors chose to print his portraits in black and white as a way of connecting the Occupy movement to history. We often read black and white images as recording events at some remove from the here and now. Deepening that remove, his cropping of the photographs also partially obscures the signs each protester carries. By centering each photo's frame on the face of the protestor, he keeps the specifics of the protest signs largely off-stage. The fragments of each message—democracy, freedom, power—connect the Occupy images to an older tradition of photographic activism that engages the ongoing struggle to protect democracy. Iconic photographs have emerged from many political movements and contributed to changing public opinion and new legislation. The Occupy protesters whom Connors depicts are broadly diverse, representing all ages, races, classes, genders, religions, and political affiliations. Yet his point is that all agree on one idea: something is terribly wrong with our country. Connors' presentation of this project in a grid emphasizes the tension between a collective and the individuals within it. As a viewer, you move in and out of contact with each person and the overwhelming drama of the grid. One portrait in particular embodies the spirit of General Assembly. In Mark (2012), a bearded man stares through oversize aviator glasses, his hoodie pulled up over his balding head looking like a Franciscan friar's robe. Because Connors arranged these portraits chronologically, a subtle sense of changing seasons and time gradually emerges. In this image, the dappled sunshine feels like morning—like the beginning. His expression mixes sadness, accusation, and deep resolve. Here is a man who has made a decision. The photograph calmly depicts the terrifying moment when your life changes, when you cannot see how far you will walk, but you know you have set off in a new direction. Mary Lee Hodgens Associate Director