

POWER TO THE PEOPLE POLITICAL ART NOW

MARCH 21–MAY 27, 2018

WALL PANELS OF THE EXHIBITION

INTRODUCTION

How political is art permitted to be? How political does art have to be? And how far may it diverge from the classic concept of art? How much democracy does a work of art tolerate? — These are fundamental questions that are asked time and again. However, depending on the particular society, the answers are very different. In fact, there is no art *without* society. Art always has a social component; it takes place in a context, in a specific period, and in a specific country. Involved in art are concrete persons who produce it, institutions in which it is presented, and finally viewers who do not stand in a vacuum. Art generally changes as well when social conditions change.

A great deal has happened in recent years. On the one hand, we experienced (and are experiencing) a kind of bleak age, a neo-Biedermeier period in which withdrawing into the private sphere plays a major role. Some people are even speaking of an era of “post-democracy”. The symptoms: populist leaders, fake news, autocratic backlash, and totalitarian propaganda. Participation in political organizations is declining. Elections are no longer capable of mobilizing voters. Democracy’s loss of substance seems dramatic. At the same time, there have been a number of political eruptions: the Arab Spring, the anti-Brexit campaigns, the austerity debate that also mustered the »man on the street.« There was the global Occupy movement, the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements. And there was also the enormous wave of anti-Trump demonstrations, Stuttgart 21, or the protests against the G20 summit.

Artists are the seismographs of these political movements. In view of the current situation, they are under increasing pressure to raise objections. Hence in the world of art, in particular at various recent biennales, it has become apparent that a certain politicization has occurred—and is still occurring. And finally: Is it not the historical role of the avant-garde to be critical with respect to political power?

How, then, do the artists of today express their particular concerns? What form does political art take? What are its strategies? — The exhibition *Power to the People* has taken it upon itself to follow up on this. Based on different media and including artistic positions from countries ranging from Germany, England, and Belgium to the United States, Turkey, Israel, or Libya, it encourages reflection on what political participation can look like and the consequences it entails in each case.

Quite a number of artists, such as, for instance, Guillaume Bijl, Adelita Husni-Bey, or Ricarda Roggan, take a concerned or at least critical look at the fragility of popular representation and the darkest recesses of parliamentary democracy. The examination of public protests as a form of political participation constitutes another key element. Democracy means conflict, means arguing about things. Demonstrations are still an important form of articulating political will, and Nasan Tur, Jens Ullrich, and Katie Holten remind us of this.

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Art is not a party-political organ, not a political essay, not a scholarly analysis. Yet in its own way it can contribute to discourses and give us food for thought, provide us with experiences and perceptions so that we are in a position to imagine issues more freely and initiate very different processes, or address issues for which there is elsewhere no public.

On one side of the spectrum of political art we find poetic reflections such as *Ballerinas and Police* by Halil Altindere which, as an allusion to sure consequences, would bring in something more explicit. On the other side we find artists who operate as activists themselves, such as, for example, Katie Holten or Andrea Bowers, who have integrated civil disobedience into their work. In a certain way, the role of the artist has also changed; many artists have taken on and transformed the tasks of the sociologist, journalist, or even the political agitator. *Forensic Architecture* is a group founded at Goldsmiths College in London that does not consist of artists as such, but is a research group. It conducts intense, investigative research on concrete political injustices that then become visible in an art context.

Another important aspect is the new media-related potential for political participation. While Julius von Bismarck addresses the manipulability of media images, a work such as *5000 Likes* by Mark Flood reflects on the often manipulative production of opinion in the social media. It has to do with the fact that due to new technologies, it has become very easy to become politically involved by simply clicking on the like button.

Last but not least, visitor participation is sought. *Power to the People* also poses the question concerning the viewer as activist. It is meant to encourage one to reflect on: What could my own contribution look like? Am I politically involved? How far can or do I want to go? There are very different levels of involvement. From the like button and the motto T-shirt such as the one by Rirkrit Tiravanija, who invites us to wear the claim that “Freedom cannot be simulated”, to the police riot shields by Ahmet Ögüt, which can make for a rather oppressive physical experience—all of these works address the active participation of citizens in the shaping of public life.

ARTISTS

HALIL ALTINDERE

Halil Altindere deals primarily with political subjects such as state power and individual resistance, the representation and aesthetization of authority. Needless to say, the photo, multimedia, and performance artist illuminates the current political situation in his homeland of Turkey. His aesthetic is characterized by an almost poetic form of criticism in which music often plays an important role.

In *Ballerinas and Police*, ballet dancers wearing classical white costumes dance to Tchaikovsky's music for *Swan Lake*. However, they are then interrupted by a heavily armed police escort and continue to dance in resistance. The choreography changes, and the ballerinas now perform sequences of movements used by police for “crowd control”—pathos and police are thus meaningfully contrasted. Up for discussion in *Ballerinas and Police* is the power of art as well as political pomp with an aesthetic aspiration, which is tellingly ironized.

JULIUS VON BISMARCK

Julius von Bismarck's works can be thought of as pseudoscientific experiments. One of his best-known inventions is the *Image Fulgurator*. It resembles a camera, but it reverses the mechanism

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of taking a photograph and interferes with the photos of others. When a camera flash is released nearby, the device projects a motif associated with the photographed object for a fraction of a second and superimposes it onto the target photo. With his *Image Fulgurator*, von Bismarck mainly seeks out media-effective events and photo-op rallies. His activist and politically subversive interventions play with the manipulative potential of images and expand the range of forms of artistic resistance.

ANDREA BOWERS

As an activist, Andrea Bowers deals with contemporary political issues, United States history, border regimes, and protest movements. The contents she takes up in her art range from workers' rights, environmental actions, Food Watch, and the Occupy movement to gender issues and discrimination based on sex. She frequently collaborates with other activists in the realization of her works.

The astonishing protest medium in the form of a pirate ship is the result of collaboration between Andrea Bowers and a young tree activist. She solidarized with environmentalists as part of their campaign to preserve an old tree population in Arcadia, California, by occupying the trees in order to save them from being felled. At the same time, she questions why men typically dominated tree-pirate actions for so long. The pirate ship thus takes up the cause of Mary Daly, a prominent American representative of ecofeminism and a statement by whom is printed on one of the ship's sails.

SAM DURANT

Sam Durant works in such diverse media as drawing, sculpture, installation, and sound, time and again focusing on political issues. In doing so he questions current but sadly almost "timeless" problems such as racism, the struggles of civil rights movements, and the failure of utopian models of society.

His text-objects are from his *Electric Signs* group of works. They present the title concepts in standard illuminated displays. The handwritten originals of the texts frequently stem from signs carried by demonstrators at political protest marches. Taken out of their original context and transferred into a seemingly commercial one, the *Electric Signs* present committed political demands—in *Let's Judge Ourselves as People*, for example, the demand for political self-determination. However, they also essentially raise questions about the social use of language and its context. What does a word like "justice" stand for? That we need more justice? Or, conversely, that we are living in a more or less functional state under the rule of law?

MARK FLOOD

Mark Flood deals with the influence of today's mass media and our digital present by taking up the visual language of Google, Facebook, et al. The installation *5000 Likes* ties in with the "like" cult of our digital communication. The canvases can be distributed about the space by the visitor, in analogy with the rating culture of social media networks. A ranking of the exhibited works

emerges over time. The fact that the actual number of paintings—4,344—is massively rounded up appears to be symptomatic of our time. Thus Flood adopts the behavior of the “like economy”, the digital communication networks that act like commercial players and pursue the interests of the market economy. However, they make a mockery of the belief in the free control of personal and political content, because one can only “like” what one finds in a constructed setting. Hence the statement “I like” dwindles to become a mere gesture. This becomes especially problematic when only information is presented that matches user profiles and thus influences the formation of political opinion.

HIWA K

Hiwa K’s artistic work frequently revolves around precarious situations from his own life. The video *This Lemon Tastes of Apple* shows Hiwa K and his friend Daaron Othman at a demonstration in Sulaymaniyah, the last more or less peaceful one before the violent crackdown of the Iraqi Spring. While marching, the two play the familiar chords from the Western classic *Once Upon a Time in the West*, Hiwa K on the harmonica, his friend on the guitar. In the further, dramatic course of the video, the demonstrators hand each other lemons to hold in front of their faces as protection from the tear gas being used by the military. Video shots of this “demonstrative” music performance are supplemented with film footage shot by other demonstrators during the protest, this extending its documentary character. At the same time, the title *This Lemon Tastes of Apple* recalls the use of the poison gas with which Saddam Hussein’s air force tried to exterminate Iraq’s Kurdish population in 1988. Cynically, the murderous gas smelled like apples.

RICARDA ROGGAN

The conceptual photographs by Ricarda Roggan, who grew up in East Germany, demonstrate that a voting booth alone is not necessarily a sign of a thriving democracy. In dry, laconic photos, using minimal means she unmaskes the structural disposition of a system that merely presented itself as democratic and in which elections represented no more than a performative act. Like an archeologist, she reconstructed the furnishings that were used for company elections at the Baumwollspinnerei (cotton mill) in Leipzig in her studio, with the original spacing carefully measured. She then documented it in all its uselessness. With their vacuity and civil-servant-like brittleness, the oppressive photos are memento mori of the equally vacuous instruments of a nominal democracy.

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA

Rirkrit Tiravanija belongs to a generation that in the nineties began to put the concept of art to the test. Politics and economics, especially in the Western world, were defined by a new conservatism. The question of how art could be socially effective in a new way took on importance. Instead of “Please Don’t Touch”, the active and physical participation of the visitor was encouraged. Such was the advent of so-called Relational Art. Its material: interpersonal relationships. Its principle: participation.

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The work *Untitled 2016 (form follows function or vice versa no. two)* was created for an exhibition entitled *Take Me (I'm Yours)* at New York's Jewish Museum. It assembled works that turned radically away from the notion that an original work of art has a special aura, for they were reproduced in large quantities and visitors could take them home with them, in Tiravanija's case T-shirts. Those who did become part of the work and had to examine the slogan "freedom cannot be simulated" printed on the T-shirt, at the latest when putting it on. One learns just what is meant by the slogan through the large-format collage *Untitled 2016 (freedom cannot be simulated, south china morning post, September 26–27–28–29–30, 2014)*. It is made up of pages from the Chinese daily named in the title. The dates refer to the so-called Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, a wave of protests triggered by the plan to limit voting rights. The slogan itself stems from the book *Unkempt Thoughts* by the Polish poet Stanisław Jerzy Lec, which Tiravanija came across during his involvement with notions of freedom and political protest.

AHMET ÖĞÜT

In many of his works, Ahmet Öğüt addresses issues such as structural inequality, government repression, and public protests as a central form of political participation. His politically motivated installations and films are often directly linked to current conflicts such as the Occupy movement in New York, the Arab Spring in Cairo, or the violent clashes in his hometown of Diyarbakır.

The Swinging Doors consists of two original police riot shields that have been turned into saloon doors. Corresponding with the country in which the exhibition is presented, the artist installs the riot shields used by the respective national police. The installation, which Öğüt refers to as a "social readymade", creates a situation that can only be experienced in its entirety through participation. Visitors can pass through the narrow space separating the shields and experience a personal exercise in resistance. The way in which the respective national police treat demonstrators and the question concerning how conflicts are dealt with constitute the essence of Öğüt's artistic examination.

FORENSIC ARCHITECTURE

"Each Friday in Palestine, a number of nonarmed demonstrations are held against the Israeli occupation. The following case deals with what the Israel military calls ›nonlethal munitions‹—tear gas canisters—shot at unarmed participants in these protests. The village of Bil'in, located on the western slopes of the West Bank, is at the heart of these struggles. In 2004, the wall was built on the village lands in a way that allowed the expansion of the nearby settlement of Modi'in Illit. In 2007, the Israeli High Court of Justice ordered the dismantling of the wall in this area and its relocation to a less invasive path. While the military avoided implementing the court ruling, demonstrators continued to protest the injustice of the wall and that of the occupation as a whole.

On April 17, 2009, Bassem Abu Rahma was shot and killed in Bil'in during a demonstration against the separation wall that was being built on the village lands. Abu Rahma was hit with a tear gas canister shot from across the wall, which in this area, at the time, was a system of fences. He was standing on the eastern side of the separation wall when the munition struck him in the chest, causing massive internal bleeding, which led to his death.

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The report produced by *Forensic Architecture* and SITU Research was initiated at the request of attorney Michael Sfard, who acted for Abu Rahma's parents, and the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem. They asked us to examine a host of available data (including videos and photographs taken on the day of the event) in order to ascertain whether the shot that killed Abu Rahma was aimed directly at him. The report focused on establishing the probable angle at which the munition that killed Abu Rahma was discharged. The purpose was to refute assertions made by the Israeli military that the round in question struck a wire in the fence, causing it to change direction and hit the victim, thus unintentionally leading to his death.

As in many contemporary sites of demonstration across the West Bank, in Bil'in there was an abundance of video cameras present. The event was recorded in three sequences of video footage from three different digital cameras (two handheld and one on a tripod). Within the video footage there exists much spatial information. On obtaining the videos we synced them by aligning distinct elements in the soundtrack. We then traced the movement of each of the three cameras on a digital model of the terrain whose general contours we obtained from maps and satellite images and whose detailed features we have harvested from examining the video files. Having each person, object, or specific feature represented from two or three separate vantages allowed for a triangulation and the approximation of their location in space.

Fractions of a second directly preceding the impact, one of the videographers, David Reeb, an Israeli artist and political activist, was standing within a meter of Abu Rahma. At 05:44:07, a single frame—whose duration is one twenty-fourth of a second—captures faint traces of the movement of the projectile from the area where the soldiers are deployed west of the wall, through the fencing system that composes the wall in this part, to the area where the demonstrators are located east of the wall. Fractions of a second later, it strikes Abu Rahma, who is standing directly to Reeb's right and is seen falling to the ground, twisted in pain.

The single frame extracted from David Reeb's video was used to reconstruct the path of the munition in a virtual model of the scene. After locating the position of the camera and Abu Rahma, the line illustrating the trajectory was extrapolated into the space behind to form a plane bounded by Reeb's camera and the edge of the video frame. This virtual plane defines all possible flight paths converging on Abu Rahma. When extended outward beyond the separation barrier, a zone containing the probable firing position is determined. Based on the known positions of the Israeli military soldiers at the time, the maximum angle of fire was determined to be five degrees. The passage of the munition seen in Reeb's cone of vision supports the conclusion that, contrary to the Israeli military statements, the weapon was being aimed well below the allowable sixty-degree limit, with the likely purpose of killing or maiming the demonstrator.

Our report identifying the place and angle from which Abu Rahma was shot and the trajectory of the munitions was presented by advocates Michael Sfard and Emily Schaeffer on March 28, 2010, along with other testimonies of participants. On July 11, 2010, fifteen months after the April 17, 2009, killing of Abu Rahma, the military prosecution opened a criminal investigation, which it previously refused to do. On September 10, 2013, despite the report, the government announced that the military had decided to close the case, citing ›lack of evidence‹ for an indictment, and insisting it did not know the identity of the shooter. The military asked the court to reject the claim, close the file without any indictments, and offered B'Tselem the opportunity to appeal its decision—a process that has been initiated but might take years to reach a conclusion.”

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This report was taken from the website

<http://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/bilin/>