

UNDER PRESSURE TO PROTEST—THE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT PRESENTS AN EXHIBITION ON THE POLITICAL ART OF THE PRESENT DAY

POWER TO THE PEOPLE POLITICAL ART NOW

MARCH 21–MAY 27, 2018

PRESS PREVIEW: TUESDAY, MARCH 20, 2018, 10 A.M.

From March 21 to May 27, 2018, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is presenting an extensive exhibition on the political art of the present day. Based on a wide variety of different media, such as installations, photography, drawing, painting, and film, *Power to the People: Political Art Now* takes stock of contemporary positions that can be read as seismographs of political activity.

Democracy appears to be in crisis, the era of post-democracy has already dawned. The symptoms are manifold: populist leaders, fake news, autocratic backlash, totalitarian propaganda, and neoliberalism. For some time, however, society has also been experiencing the path of the art's return to the political—a re-politicization is palpable. Images of demonstrations in the media have shaped public perception in recent years: waving flags, posters, or banners on streets and squares, at the Women's March, in anti-Brexit campaigns, or in Occupy actions. There have been renewed waves of protest relating to very diverse contexts, countries, and political systems. This has affected artists as well. They create works that they regard as instruments of critique and explicitly motivated by politics.

The exhibition *Power to the People* focuses on fundamental questions and examinations of the phenomena of and potential for political involvement. Stances are called into question, forms of protest depicted, and new stages of de-democratization considered. In doing so, the mechanisms and logic of political participation are addressed, even beyond concrete concerns. Through bringing together artistic positions from all manner of countries—from Germany, England, Belgium, and the United States to Turkey, Israel, or Libya—it hence encourages reflection not least on what political participation can look like and the consequences it entails in each case.

The exhibition brings together 43 works, including artworks by, for instance Guillaume Bijl, Adelita Husni-Bey, or Ricarda Roggan, who take a critical look at the fragility of popular representation, the breakdown of public institutions, and the limits of parliamentary democracy. The works of Halil Altindere, Osman Bozkurt, or Ahmet Ögüt deal with structural inequality, state oppression and arbitrariness, but also with public protest as a form of political participation. The active involvement of citizens in designing public life is, for instance, addressed in the works of Katie Holten, Rirkrit Tiravanija, or Nasan Tur—while the spectrum of artistic forms of resistance is shown in the works of Phyllida Barlow, Hiwa K, or Marinella Senatore. Works such as those by Jens Ullrich examine the poster as a medium of political protest, while artists such as Julius von Bismarck or Mark Flood deal with the manipulability of media images and new, primarily medial forms of political participation and production of opinion. The collective Forensic Architecture or Andrea Bowers merge artistic methods and activism in their works and pose the question of art as a politically productive force.

The exhibition *Power to the People: Political Art Now* is supported by the Verein der Freunde der Schirn Kunsthalle e. V.

Dr. Philipp Demandt, Director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, about the exhibition: "Recently, we have experienced art's return to the political. The artists appear as seismographs in these politically eventful times. The exhibition *Power to the People: Political Art Now* also touches on the

question of how political art is permitted to or should be. This is a question that we have to ask again and again at all times.”

“There is no art without society. Art always has a social component; it takes place within a context, at a particular time, in a particular country. Art has specific individuals who produce it; it has institutions where it is presented as well as specific viewers. At the same time, the particular strength of art is that it is clearly not a political party organ, but instead has access to its own specific means. The fact that it can open up spaces to think, spaces of experience that make it possible for it to deal more freely with complex contexts beyond daily politics,” explains Dr. Martina Weinhart, curator of the exhibition.

A SELECTION OF THE ARTISTIC POSITIONS IN THE EXHIBITION

In art, quite a few works take a concerned look at the fragility of popular representation and the limits of parliamentary democracy. The installation *Voting Booth Museum* of 2009 by **Guillaume Bijl** (*1946) presents the central tool of democracy—the free election of representatives—as a relict worth being exhibited. Six different voting booth models are staged by means of special lighting and color control. Information panels state the booths’ places of origin—Finland, Azerbaijan, Austria, Japan, Morocco, and China. The voting booths seem curiously antiquated and slightly shabby, almost as if the installation deals with a commemorative event from a postdemocratic era.

The fact that a voting booth alone is not necessarily a sign of a thriving democracy is shown by the photographs of **Ricarda Roggan** (*1972). For her *Triptych (two chairs and on table/chair chair and box / chair, table and partition wall)* of 2001, she photographed furniture for company elections in the German Democratic Republic. She found the chairs, tables, cabinets, and partition walls at the Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei (Leipzig Cotton Mill) and set them up again in her studio, making sure that the original spacing were carefully measured. With their vacuity and civil-servant-like brittleness, the oppressive photos are a *memento mori* for the equally vacuous instruments of a nominal democracy.

In her metaphorical painting *The Sleepers* (2012), the artist **Adelita Husni-Bey** (*1985) focuses on the breakdown of institutions and the unreliability of the individual. What can be seen is a conference room with tables, at which the participants sit slack and idle: their heads and upper bodies resting on their knees, their arms hanging down. Husni-Bey depicts the horror vision of skeptics of representative democracy: a gathering of limp bodies united in inactivity. The painting merges reproach and bias—inactive politicians who do not do their job and condemn public life to a standstill. Husni-Bey’s *The Sleepers* was created in the course of her research on visual manifestations of power in Western societies. During the Arab Spring, the work was used by her relatives in Libya as a poster at protests against the idleness of the government.

In his tableau *A Circle Full of Ecstasy* (2016), **Edgar Leciejewski** (*1977) looks at the other side, namely that of representatives. The artist has brought together 77 photographic portraits of politicians and heads of state, et al. of Bashar al-Assad, Fidel Castro, Queen Elisabeth II, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Kim Jong-Un, Theresa May, Angela Merkel, Barack Obama, or Wladimir Putin. All of the individuals depicted are united in the gesture of raising their right hands in greeting. Whether democracy or dictatorship, republic or monarchy, communism or capitalism, the form of government they represent is consequently of no importance. All of them are united in one gesture, in the end, staging is a fixed pillar of political representation.

As a central medium and as art for mass distribution, the poster occupies an important position and is time after time reinterpreted. The artist **Jens Ullrich** (*1968) processes images found in newspapers by replacing the slogans with abstract Letraset figurations. He then ultimately produces the works as a poster that are mounted on the wall. Ullrich’s montages are shaped by

his parents' lifelong engagement against atomic energy and nuclear armament. He already participated in demonstrations and blockades with his family when he was a child.

With *She Persisted* (2017), the Schirn is presenting a ten-part series of pencil drawings by the artist **Katie Holten** (*1975). The series shows portraits of famous women from various eras and contexts such as Angela Davis, Emily Dickinson, Chelsea Manning, or Malala Yousafzai. They are women who have written history. Holten presents them to us as a gallery of female figures of identification. She produced the drawings—by her own account—during breaks in political protest. The election campaign of Donald Trump and his inauguration as president of the United States have politicized her work and her understanding of herself as an artist.

Rirkrit Tiravanija (*1961) had printed white T-shirts with the slogan “Freedom cannot be simulated.” They are displayed in the exhibition and can be taken home by visitors. The background of this participatory action is elucidated by the large-format newspaper collage *Untitled 2016 (freedom cannot be simulated, south china morning post, september 26-27-28-29-30, 2014)* (2016), which is also presented in the exhibition. It consists of pages from a Chinese daily newspaper and makes reference to the days of the so-called Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong—a wave of public protests that was triggered by the government's plan to curtail the right to vote. Individuals who take a T-shirt simultaneously become part of the work, and will also have to deal with what is printed on it, at the latest when wearing the T-shirt. Tiravanija belongs to a generation of artists who, in the 1990s, began to put the concept of art to the test and to question how art can have an impact on society in a new way.

On the other side of the spectrum of political art are poetic reflections such as the video work *Ballerinas and Police* of 2017 by **Halil Altındere** (*1971). The photo, multimedia, and action artist occupies himself primarily with political issues such as state power and individual resistance and the representation and aestheticizing of power. In doing so, Altındere sheds light not least on the current political situation in his home country, Turkey. A poetic-seeming form of critique, in which music often plays a decisive role, characterizes his aesthetics. In his video, he shows female ballet dancers dancing to the *Swan Lake* composition by Tchaikovsky, who are interrupted by a police escort, and put up resistance through dancing. The power of art is addressed in the work, just as is political pomp with an aesthetic appeal, which is here lampooned.

It is also possible, in contrast, to find artists who engage in activism themselves, first and foremost, for instance, **Andrea Bowers** (*1965). Her *Radical Feminist Pirate Ship Tree Sitting Platform* (2013) is a relict of an act of nonviolent civil disobedience in which the artist herself participated. The installation in the form of a pirate ship was used as a platform for occupying redwood trees in California, which have been being destroyed in a radical manner for several years. In her works, Bowers occupies herself with sociopolitical contents such as workers' rights, environmental concerns, the Occupy movement, gender issues, and gender discrimination. When realizing her works, she often works in collaboration with other activists.

To place political demands in public space and give visibility to specific concerns, artists make tactical use of media. The group **Forensic Architecture** joins forces in changing compositions of teams to do research on overlooked aspects of acts of violence using artistic practices and forensic methods. The Schirn is showing the video *Bil'in: The Killing of Bassem Ibrahim Abu Rahma, 17 April 2009*, which reconstructs the violent death of a young Palestinian man during a demonstration on the West Bank, on the border to Israel. The family's lawyer and the human rights organization B'Tselem commissioned the report. For it, Forensic Architecture analyzed a wide range of video and photo data of the incident. This enabled them to ascertain that the shot that killed Abu Rahma was fired directly at him. The report spurred investigations. The criminal investigation and proceedings continue until today.

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The fact that political will is finding new channels in the digital age is elucidated by the mobile installation *5000 Likes* (2015/2016) by **Mark Flood** (*1957). It reflects the frequently manipulative production of opinion on social networks. Through transferring digital “Likes” to an analogue exhibition space, Flood shows how perception and the production of political opinions can be influenced. Visitors have the opportunity to randomly distribute canvases with the word “Like” in the space and to consequently weigh in on all the artworks presented in the exhibition. With his work, the artist takes the belief in the free control of personal and political contents to the absurd. The *Image Fulgurator* (2007–11)—an invention by **Julius von Bismarck** (*1983)—supplements the spectrum of subversive artistic practices. The device looks like a camera, but turns the mechanism of taking photographs on its head through intervening in the photos of others. When a camera flash is triggered in the nearby surroundings, the device projects a motif associated with the object photographed for a split second and superimposes it on the alien photo. The device is primarily used by von Bismarck at medially effective events and demonstrations worth being photographed. His activist and politically subversive interventions play with the potential to manipulate pictures.

The artist **Phyllida Barlow** (*1944) is represented in the rotunda of the Schirn with her large-scale installation *Untitled: 100banners2015* (2015), which makes reference to flags as symbols of a shared identity and power—and of resistance against the latter. Flags typically symbolize countries, but they are also used in parades and protest events. Barlow deliberately deprives the flags of their significance, since no text or message can be recognized. The flags are unadorned and sewn together in an almost amateurish way. The fragile mounting with sandbags also reinforces the impression of improvisation. With her strategy of artistic dilettantism, Barlow succeeds in demystifying the bearer of political significance as such.

ALL THE ARTISTS IN THE EXHIBITION

Halil Altindere, Phyllida Barlow, Guillaume Bijl, Julius von Bismarck, Andrea Bowers, Osman Bozkurt, Tobias Donat, Sam Durant, Omer Fast, Mark Flood, Forensic Architecture, Dani Gal, Katie Holten, Adelita Husni-Bey, Hiwa K, Edgar Leciejewski, Jonathan Monk, Ahmet Öğüt, Ricarda Roggan, Marinella Senatore, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Nasan Tur, Jens Ullrich

NEWSPAPER FOR THE EXHIBITION *Power to the People: Political Art Now*, edited by Martina Weinhart. With a foreword by Philipp Demandt and an essay by Martina Weinhart, as well as work texts, interviews with and statements by the artists participating; bilingual edition, 64 pages, 70 illustrations, 24.5 x 35 cm, design Moiré: Marc Kappeler, Dominik Huber, Simon Trüb; in-house publisher, ca. € 4.20 (Schirn).

VENUE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt **DURATION** March 21–May 27, 2018 **INFORMATION** www.schirn.de **EMAIL** welcome@schirn.de **TELEPHONE** +49.69.29 98 82-0 **FAX** +49.69.29 98 82-240 **ADMISSION** 9 €, reduced 7 €; free entrance for children under the age of 8 **GUIDED TOURS** Tue. 5 pm, Wed. 7 pm, Thu. 8 pm, Sat. 3 pm, Sun. 5 pm **TOUR BOOKING** individual tours or group tours can be booked under Tel. +49.69.29 98 82-0 and email fuehrungen@schirn.de **CURATOR** Dr. Martina Weinhart **CURATORIAL ASSISTANCE** Maria Sitte **MEDIA PARTNER** Frankfurter Rundschau

THE EXHIBITION IS SUPPORTED BY

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SOCIAL MEDIA The Schirn communicates about the exhibition in the social web **HASHTAGS** #PowerToThePeople #Schirn **FACEBOOK, TWITTER, YOUTUBE, INSTAGRAM, PINTEREST, SNAPCHAT** [schirn.de](https://www.schirn.de) **SCHIRN-MAGAZIN** www.schirn-mag.com

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