

THE NEW YORK TIMES

APRIL 17, 2018

PROTESTING ARTISTS STEP OFF OF THE STREETS AND INTO THE GALLERY

By Catherine Hickley



Mark Flood's "5000 Likes" (2015-16), a commentary on social media. Credit... Norbert Miguletz/Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt

FRANKFURT — A sea of 100 multicolored banners in the atrium of the Schirn Kunsthalle here, roughly assembled using plywood, fabric and adhesive tape, provides the first indication that this art gallery is in protest mode. The 2015 installation by the British artist Phyllida Barlow is a pertinent symbol of our turbulent times — an epoch of #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, marches for women and in defense of science, and demonstrations against gun violence.

Held down with red and orange sandbags, Ms. Barlow's banners are devoid of slogans or symbols, which serves this topical, ultracontemporary, international exhibition well. The show, called "Power to the People," focuses on the universal subject of politics in art, not on the political issues themselves. Its achievement is that it takes a step back and shows how art can reflect our political world.

"Artists are asking some very fundamental, very interesting questions," Martina Weinhardt, the curator of the exhibition, said in an interview. "We don't want to answer them — we want to raise them."

The question posed in the first room of the Schirn show is an unnerving one in an era characterized by rising authoritarianism, populism and a flood of "fake news": Are we entering a post-democratic age? A large installation by the Belgian artist Guillaume Bijl recreates voting booths from Austria, Azerbaijan, China, Finland,

Japan and Morocco. In a museum context, staged with dramatic lighting against dark walls, the booths look like cheap relics from a bygone chapter of history.

History was the starting point for “Power to the People” — the slogan, after all, harks back to the 1960s and ’70s. The original idea for the show was for an exhibition to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1968 youth movement, Ms. Weinhart said. “But then I quickly took a step further, because the times we are living in now are just as interesting,” she added. “Perhaps there is even more upheaval now than there was then. There is an incredible energy that is setting something in motion, and that is reflected in art.”

She pointed out that some critics have even suggested that today’s protests are works of art themselves. In *The New York Times*, Holland Cotter described the Women’s March on the day of President Trump’s inauguration as “the largest work of political performance art ever,” saying it was “deeply felt, smartly choreographed” and “memorably costumed.”

Katie Holten was at that march, wearing a “pussy hat” and carrying a homemade banner. The 42-year-old, an Irish citizen who lives in New York and describes herself as a “visual artist and resistance fighter,” took photographs at the Women’s March and the March for Science months later, which she assembled into collages titled “We the People,” featured in the Schirn exhibition.

In the past, Ms. Holten’s art focused primarily on environmental subjects. “I have kept away from economics and politics because that is not my personal interest,” she said in a telephone interview. But since Mr. Trump’s election campaign, that has changed, she said.

“Some days I was at six rallies,” she added. “It has never been like this before.”

Ms. Holten’s series of 10 pencil portraits, titled “She Persisted” (2017), features women who faced down adversity, including Anita Hill, Emily Dickinson, Chelsea Manning and Harriet Tubman. “My work has never included anything human before,” Ms. Holten says. “The portraits were a form of meditation, a way of taking a break from making signs and going out on the street. But it was also a reminder that there are people who have dealt with and are dealing with obstacles. There is hope.”

The contribution of the Texas-based artist Mark Flood to the Frankfurt exhibition is more topical than he could have imagined when he created it. “5000 Likes” (2015-16) satirizes Facebook in a way that resonates today, as the company confronts the fallout from revelations that Cambridge Analytica exploited the data of up to 87 million Facebook users.

“A mere 70 likes are enough to allow a computer analysis to produce a personality profile,” the catalog says. In a parody of social media superficiality, Mr. Flood created thousands of small-format paintings bearing the word “LIKE,” and visitors to the exhibition are invited to place them in front of artworks that appeal to them.

Three Turkish artists featured at the Schirn remind us that political resistance can be dangerous in many parts of the world. Ahmet Ogut’s “The Swinging Doors” features two riot shields attached to either side of an entrance. They can be pushed open from either direction, like a classic saloon door.

Leaning against the shields to pass through the doors gives the visitor a sense of what it is like to confront the police as a defenseless demonstrator. Returning in the other direction is to feel the fear of riot police officers facing mass protests with just a truncheon and a sheet of thick plastic as protection.

Nasan Tur's video installation "Preparation No. 1" projects six films of a man energetically but meticulously getting ready for something, perhaps a demonstration. In furtive close-up shots, he packs a heavy chain, tests a megaphone and marks a map in the semidarkness of a room with lowered blinds, as though working undercover.

"Ballerinas and Police," a 2017 video installation by Halil Altindere, addresses the innocence of some of the demonstrators who took part in the wave of protests in Turkey that began in Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013. Dancers in white tutus perform to Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" in a bleak urban setting. As heavily armed police officers — also wearing ballet shoes — try to disrupt the performance, the dancers continue to twirl.

"With the uprising, there was an immediate polarization," Mr. Altindere said in an interview. "It started with the politicization of the young generation and it quickly turned into a more violent environment. I wanted to show innocence and oppression, the fragility of everyday life in that situation."

Mr. Altindere publishes a contemporary art magazine in Istanbul, and his work, which has featured at the Documenta art exhibition in Kassel, Germany, and at the Berlin Biennale, focuses mainly on political themes.

"Censorship is highly possible" in Turkey today, he said. "But it is important that artists should not start exercising self-censorship. In this show, you can see that even in the most oppressed countries, artists manage to express their opinions."

At one point in Mr. Altindere's video, laser beams shooting from the ballerinas' eyes appear to paralyze the police. It's a hint at the power of art to confront authority and its ability to force change.

"It's really hard," Ms. Holten said. "We just have to keep doing what we do."