

The State of Political Art After a Year of Protest Movements

Back to the white cube

By [Martha Schwendener](#) *Wednesday, Oct 17 2012*

A year ago this week, I published an article in the *Voice* about art and [Occupy Wall Street](#). Having written for years about art and resistance played out mostly as a theoretical or formal exercise, the occupation in [Zuccotti Park](#) felt like a miracle, a genuine efflorescence of nonviolent protest. Inspired by occupations and uprisings around the globe, OWS—despite all its problems—represented a moment in which people came together and created a brief, provisionally utopian community where art and living converged.

It was widely remarked on at the time that the art world—well-known artists and others involved in the institutions of art—did not figure prominently.

Instead, many participants came from fields like anthropology, geography, or public medicine. But now that Arab Spring, Occupy, and the global "movement of squares" have receded

and art has stepped back into its customary role, analyzing and historicizing events by turning them into objects and showcasing them in exhibitions, a few questions arise:



apexart

Is contemporary art politically useless? Does it serve only as a bystander, offering smart academic responses—or worse, packaging revolution into edgier-than-average commodities to sell to the very elites that these movements challenged? Does art lay the ground for future insurrections, or merely undergird a whole system of capitalist thought and institutions that have to be changed before anything else can change?

Let's look at a few local examples.

Occupy Museums at Momenta in Brooklyn (56 Bogart Street, momentaart.org) currently finds one of the best-known OWS art groups, which held general assemblies in major New York museums (and, more problematically, "occupied" the Berlin Biennale this summer), moving into a new phase in an alternative space in [Bushwick](#). The title of the project, "Occupy Your BFF," refers to the [Bloomberg Family Foundation](#), one of Momenta's supporters. A text on the wall, scrawled OWS-style on the inside of a cardboard pizza box, describes how Bloomberg's foundation, set up in [Delaware](#), has drained New York of potential tax revenue and represents "the private takeover of the public sector; part of a quiet corporate revolution: a grab-it-all moment for the 1 percent."

"Occupy Your BFF" obviously retains the rhetoric of OWS and doesn't shy away from critique. But when a group founded on protesting in museums sets up residence in a white cube space, it obviously changes the nature of its mission and message. Occupy Museums in [MOMA](#) and the Whitney, both of which I attended, felt spectacular—in all senses of that word—and historically significant. Here, they've reverted to something more familiar and programmed: a combination of social practice and institutional critique.

A longer view of radical history is offered by Hito Steyerl in her first U.S. solo exhibition at e-flux (311 East Broadway, e-flux.com). The video *Adorno's Grey* (2012) tackles the theory-versus-praxis conundrum, focusing on an episode in the summer of 1969 in which the German philosopher [Theodor Adorno](#) fled a lecture hall when female student activists bared their breasts, after what turned out to be his last lecture (Adorno died in August 1969). Did these belligerent "protest breasts" (not sexual, and not maternal) kill Adorno, the video asks? And was this gesture a critique of theory? The theory-praxis dialectic is addressed in an oblique way in the video when a (male) activist recounts using

apexart

Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—the actual book—as a shield during a protest, protecting him from police brutality.

Steyerl's *November* (2004) is also couched in the post-revolutionary ethos. (Its title has particular resonance for art folks, since the initially radical American art journal *October*, named after Eisenstein's film about the 1917 Russian October Revolution, spawned its own, anonymous parody in 2006, titled *November*.) The video examines how devices in films from [Costa-Gavras's](#) *State of Siege* (1973) to [Bruce Lee's](#) martial arts served as actual templates for '70s German radicals—in the same way images moved across the globe last year, often via the Internet, spreading insurrectionary contagion.

"Unrest: Revolt Against Reason" at Apexart (291 Church Street, apexart.org) is more of a cataloging venture—and similar in many ways to the recently closed "Ruptures: Forms of Public Address" at [Cooper Union](#). Both feature(d) artists' renditions of protest signs, videos showing actual protests, and objects that mine the psychology and aesthetics of activism, in which passion and adrenaline contrast sharply to the anesthetized atmosphere of most gallery spaces.

It's hard to say, after spending the past year in the streets and now in Apexart, what [Claire Fontaine's](#) protest-style cardboard signs with text imprinted by smoke, or [Tomas Rafa's](#) video of European and American protest marches around racism, add to the experience or revolt—or how they might prefigure or inspire actual activism. Mostly, they retool it for art. "Ruptures" was similar, but somewhat more substantial, with the civil rights paintings of [Doug Ashford](#) (who was in Group Material in the '80s); [Ida Applebroog's](#) wearable sandwich boards with hilarious slogans like "I have a rhinestone uterus and a platinum vulva" or "Stop the music I'm an artist goddammit"; street signs by REPOhistory, which were actually installed in the financial district in the '90s; and videos by [Sharon Hayes](#), [Mircea Cantor](#), and [Krzysztof Wodiczko](#).

What all of these shows do, however, is return protest and activism to the white cube and institutions funded, as Occupy Museums points out, by the very people the art work theoretically rails against. "Stop using my art to wash your money," one participant said at Momenta. But this happens all the time.

apexart

Artists can resist, just as the [Cairo](#)-based media collective Mosireen did two weeks ago when it addressed a letter to Creative Time, whose Summit showcasing socially engaged art happened this past weekend. After learning that an "in-depth partner" of the summit was partially funded by the Israeli government, the group withdrew. A similar, extraordinary thing happened this summer when all four artists quit the board of Los Angeles MOCA in protest of the firing of curator [Paul Schimmel](#)—but also of the museum's general shift toward a more market-driven program influenced by wealthy trustees.

Like other fields, art has a serious money and institution problem that reached a breaking point under neoliberalism. What past art movements taught us is that changing the medium or the definition of an artist doesn't help. And, as one artist pointed out to me recently, there are aesthetics and art being made all the time within the space of social movements—so why put it inside the institution as an exhibition?