

Autumn 2018 Pre-Raphaelite Popularity Hidden Histories of the Circus The Sun Political Art Now

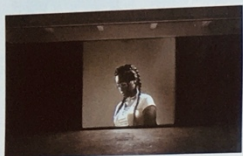
# Art Quarterly



# The political art of now

Should art have a useful role to play in society, and can it use that role to enact change? *Oliver Basciano* explores how international contemporary artists are responding to the pressing issues of our times

Right: John Akomfrah, *Vertigo Sea*, 2015; below left: Luke Willis Thompson, *autoprotrait*, 2017; below: Charlotte Prodder, *SPUDSIT*, 2016; bottom: Naem Mohaieim, *Tripoli Cancelled*, 2017



Facing page, top: 'Counter Investigations: Forensic Architecture' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2018, installation view; bottom: Anna Boghiguan, *The Salt Traders*, 2015

'Why is it more important to think about art than take care of plants or living things. In what way is art adding something to biodiversity or rather threatening it?' These words come from French artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's work *Textbau* (2018), part of a series of five paragraphs, attached as vinyl lettering to the ceiling of the Corvi-Mora gallery in London, for her exhibition 'Intensité Assouvisante', shown there earlier this year. The artist was bemoaning the impact humanity is having on the environment and worried that producing art was only exacerbating the matter. In her words, 'like destroying a forest to build an opera in which a forest might appear on stage'.

One argument to counter Gonzalez-Foerster's malaise is that art has a use that makes up for whatever environmental damage it might inflict. That art is no mere decoration or luxury commodity to be speculated upon; but the artist has the ability to enact change, that their work might bear witness to political or social injustice. It is an approach the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera has termed 'Arte Util' (useful art). This idea is a utopian and, indeed, recent vision for art. Before the advent of Modernism in the early 20th century, artists largely had different aims, as artisans or aesthetes, notwithstanding a few revolutionary counterexamples – Picasso's *Guernica*, from 1937, which drew attention to the terrors of the Spanish Civil War being a landmark in this respect.

Political art, or art that is socially aware, has become the focus of debate more recently, however, with the release of what critics have

deemed the most overtly political Turner Prize shortlist to date. As one of the jurors responsible for drawing up the shortlist, I would argue that labelling Forensic Architecture, Naem Mohaieim, Charlotte Prodder and Luke Willis Thompson merely 'political artists' does them a disservice. Their work is full of humour, humanity and suspense, and each possesses a keen eye for aesthetics. Yet it is fair to say that the shortlisted artists – who all use moving image in their work – reflect on some of the most critical current debates in society. Forensic Architecture investigate incidents of state violence and their findings have been used in law courts;

Mohaieim charts lost left-wing utopias, his documentary work given extra impetus with the rise of right-wing regimes globally; Prodder delves into questions of gender identity and technology; and Willis Thompson navigates sticky issues of race and identity. The Turner's companion on the British prize circuit, the Artes Mundi, is more specific in its aims. International in its reach (the Turner restricts itself to British or British-based artists), the award hands out £40,000 to an artist who engages with 'the human condition, social reality and lived experience' (the Turner awards £25,000 to the winner, plus £5,000 to each of the other three shortlisted artists). Anna Boghiguan, whose drawings look at the violence inherent in history, is nominated for the award's eighth edition, as are Bouchra Khalili, best known for *The Mapping Journey Project*, an emotionally charged study of refugee routes; Otobong Nkanga, whose sculptures look at the legacies of colonialism;



ARTE UTIL: DOMINIQUE GONZALEZ-FOERSTER; SPUDSIT: CHARLOTTE PRODDER; AUTOPROTRAIT: LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON; FORENSIC ARCHITECTURE: PHOTO BY MARIE BOUWER; BOURBANKIAN: COURTESY THE ARTIST; VERTIGO SEA: PHOTO BY JOHN AKOMFRAH; THE SALT TRADERS: PHOTO BY ANNA BOGHIGUAN; COURTESY THE ARTIST



Trevor Paglen, who documents sites of state surveillance; and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, whose films are steeped in questions of sexual and racial identity.

Artists who might be thought of as working 'politically' tend to fall into one of three (overlapping) categories, each borrowing strategies and ways of working from other disciplines: the artist-journalist, the artist-activist and the artist-jester. The winner of the last Artes Mundi, for example, Ghanaian-born British artist John Akomfrah, comfortably fits into the first of these. Emerging from the Black Audio Film Collective in the early 1980s, a group of moving-image artists based in east London, Akomfrah's earlier work, notably his directorial debut *Handsworth Songs* (1986), which took the 1985 riots in Handsworth in the West Midlands as its subject, and *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013), which profiled the late cultural theorist, infiltrates documentary with a poetic eye for collaged archive footage, intimate conversations and passionate soundtracks. More recently, Akomfrah has moved away from the documentary format, preferring, in the epic *Vertigo Sea* of 2015, and most recently, *Purple* (2017), a vast six-channel video installation that debuted in the Barbican's Curve Gallery last year, a strategy of collaging new and found footage with a single, poetic, narration. Both works depicted dispersed environments, from the northern regions of Norway, to the coral reefs of Tahiti, and an awesome, but dying, world.

*Vertigo Sea* and *Purple* are both warnings to an apocalyptic very-near-future. More

Right: Trevor Paglen, *They Watch the Moon*, 2010



common for the artist-journalist, however, is a preoccupation with the traumas of the past (and the long shadows that they throw over the present). In his use of archive photography and moving image the Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari has long teased out the human stories that are more often lost in the retelling of history. The artist's formative short film *Red Chewing Gum* (2000) is typical, telling the tender story of a relationship between two men, one a gum hawker. In Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War, falling in love as bombs rain down. Zaatari is a founder of the Arab Image Archive, an institution that preserves Lebanon's rich history of studio photography, many examples of which the artist has incorporated in solo work, such as the 2015 multimedia installation *Twenty-Eight Nights and a Poem*. In a new work, *The Script* (the titular

project of a solo exhibition currently touring institutions in the UK), the artist takes the performative element of portraiture into the present, by asking how the creation of YouTube home video, particularly in the Arab world, can be thought of as a mode of identity expression. Like Zaatari. Istanbul-based artist Banu Cennetoğlu is also concerned with the relationship between identity and media. For a recent new commission at the Chisenhale in London Cennetoğlu presented a multi-titled moving image work, a vast personal archive of images and videos the artist has taken over 12 years, shown in chronological order, without editing, as one continuous film, a new six-hour-long video file shown each day during the exhibition. In the same fashion that everyday life sat frictionless within the horrors of war in

Zaatari's *Red Chewing Gum*, in Cennetoğlu's work banality and high drama mix indiscriminately. Pictures of friends, the artist's studio, holidays and the like unfold alongside protests and occupations: over 128 hours and 22 minutes, the epic undertakes an effective portrait of Turkey, 2006-2018, a secular democracy sliding into oppressive autocracy. For Bruguera, the approach to politics by the likes of Akomfrah, Zaatari and Cennetoğlu, still bound to the gallery, is perhaps not 'useful' enough. She herself, while still exhibiting in museums (she will produce this year's Tate Modern Turbine Hall commission), as an artist-activist, takes a more confrontational approach. At the 2009 Havana Biennale Bruguera provided a stage and microphone, flanked by two actors in military uniform, to which members of the public were invited to come up and speak. free from censorship, for one minute. Once their time was over, the guards led the speaker away. *Tatlin's Whisper #6* (Havana Version) was an antagonistic gesture towards the government of Fidel Castro, yet the original went off without hitch. Second time around, however, the work provoked a stronger reproach. When the artist restaged the work in Havana's Plaza of the Revolution two weeks after the 2014 summit between Raul Castro and Barack Obama, Bruguera was arrested before it even began. One can't help but incorporate the artist's incarceration into her work, a blunt postscript to her subjects of freedom and control. Since the restaging, the artist has been detained on several further occasions in connection with public

Left: Akram Zaatari, *Dance To The End of Love*, 2011. Included in touring exhibition *The Script*, installation view, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, 2011



Right: Bouchra Khalil, *The Tempest Society*, 2017, for right: Banu Cennetoğlu, *Chisenhale Gallery*, 2018, installation view



Left: Wagner Schwartz, *La Bête*, 2015, performance at Biennial São de Dança, Brazil; bottom left: Tania Bruguera, *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, at Tate Modern, 2016; above: Seelan Palay, *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror*, 2017



performances in the country or while attending protests. Bruguera is one of the most high-profile proponents of art and activism, but less well-known, just-as-brave artists are also falling foul of state authorities globally. Last year Singaporean Seelan Palay was arrested (and subsequently charged) during a performance he began outside his country's parliament, titled *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror*, highlighting the incarceration of opposition politician Chia Thye Poh; the Iranian painter and women's rights activist Atena Farzadani was thrown into a Tehran prison in 2014 for portraying Iranian government officials as monkeys and goats; and in 2017 Chinese painter Hua Yong, like Ai Weiwei before him, was hounded by police after publicising illegal state evictions.

Not all artistic protests lead to such a drastic consequence, but it is telling how tolerant a government is to artistic dissent. Artists might be thought of as jesters, figures whose job it is to comment (and indeed, if needed, mock) the state, those in power and the general status quo. If the artist is allowed to proceed unmolested, one can largely breathe easily; the moment the artist is attacked, one knows that something is wrong. Artists in Brazil, for example, who up until recently had benefited from the country's economic boom, are suffering a level of kickback from the right-wing government of Michel Temer unknown since the darkest days of the country's military dictatorship. In October last year protests and counterprotests erupted outside the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM) following a nude performance by young

Artists who might be thought of as working politically tend to fall into one of three overlapping categories: the artist-activist, the artist-journalist and the artist-jester

artist Wagner Schwartz (a prominent pastor called the work 'revolting' and those involved 'destroyers of the family'). This followed the cancellation a month earlier of a group exhibition dedicated to queer Brazilian art halfway through its run at the Santander Cultural centre in Porto Alegre, following protests.

The greatest threat to that country's art scene may still be to come in the looming possibility of its new president. If the candidate for the Social Liberal Party, Jair Bolsonaro, is successful in October's elections, he promises to defund all arts spending and crack down on artistic expression. It is in light of a threat like this that one recognises all artists can become artist-jesters. That is, all art, overtly or otherwise, has the potential to be political.

- 'Turner Prize 2018', Tate Britain, London, 26 September to 6 January 2019, [tate.org.uk](http://tate.org.uk), £6.25 with National Art Pass (12.50 standard)
- 'Hyundai Commission: Tania Bruguera', Tate Modern, London, 2 October to 30 March 2019, [tate.org.uk](http://tate.org.uk), free to all
- 'Artes Mundi 8', National Museum Cardiff, 27 October to 24 February 2019, [museum.wales/ Cardiff](http://museum.wales/ Cardiff), free to all, 10% off in shop, café and restaurant with National Art Pass
- 'Akram Zaatari: The Script', Turner Contemporary, Margate, 19 October to 6 January 2019, [turnercontemporary.org](http://turnercontemporary.org), free to all, 10% off in shop with National Art Pass

Oliver Basciano is international editor *ArtReview/ArtReview Asia*, he was judging chair on *Artes Mundi 7* and is a jury member of *Turner Prize 2018*.

PHOTOS COURTESY THE ARTIST; ZHAATARI: COURTESY THE ARTIST; KHILIL: COURTESY THE ARTIST; CENNETOGLU: COURTESY THE ARTIST; SCHWARTZ: COURTESY THE ARTIST; PALAY: COURTESY THE ARTIST; BRUGUERA: COURTESY THE ARTIST; BOURGEOIS: COURTESY THE ARTIST; BOURGEOIS: COURTESY THE ARTIST; BOURGEOIS: COURTESY THE ARTIST

as ações formativas, pensei na importância das mesmas. Começamos por formar público dentro da própria instituição Sesc, realizando atividades para conectarmos todos os pontos do grande sistema que construiria esse evento: funcionários da administração, dos serviços, da comunicação, da infraestrutura, da programação, do audiovisual, da alimentação. A ideia era, não só implicarmos a equipe de trabalho mas também começarmos a trazer e receber o público. A instituição e sua equipe foram nossos primeiros espectadores.

Folheando os catálogos das edições anteriores, também nos ocorreu desfazer a costureira hierarquia entre ações artísticas e formativas. As segundas pareciam sempre menos relevantes. Desejosos de dar corpo a um festival que olha para a cidade e para o Brasil nos perguntamos como poderíamos semear futuros através das ações formativas, fomentando a continuidade dos trabalhos de artistas experientes, estimulando as novas gerações e formando público.

O reconhecimento de produções de países aos quais temos tido pouco acesso; a profissionalização do artista e a relação com a universidade (sobretudo tendo em vista a presença do curso de dança na Unicamp); a memória e a transmissão na dança; o protagonismo das mulheres nas discussões sobre gênero e a inquietação diante das próprias possibilidades éticas e políticas na dança contemporânea apareceram em diversas propostas e nos provocaram.

Com a mesma alegria que tive ao conversar sobre dança com o Sr. Antonio Carlos – funcionário da loja do Sesc Campinas – após a atividade realizada com os colaboradores do Sesc, construímos, a tantas mãos, essa Bienal, mobilizando possíveis circuitos de afetos.

E que a alegria seja (sempre) a prova dos nove!

**Cláudia Müller**

Artista com projetos em dança, performance, vídeo e instalação.

*food services. The idea was not only to involve the working team, but also to start attracting an audience. The institution and its staff were our first spectators. Looking through the catalogs of previous editions, we decided to undo the usual hierarchy between artistic performances and educational activities, in which the latter have traditionally seemed less relevant. Aiming to organize a festival that is concerned with the city and with Brazil, we seek to sow the future through educational activities, fostering the continuity of the experienced artists' work, encouraging new generations and forming our audience.*

*Recognizing productions from countries to which we have little access, stimulating the professionalization of artists and the relationship with the university (especially the dance program at Unicamp); memory and transmission in dance; provocative proposals featuring women as the protagonists of discussions about gender and the restlessness of ethical and political possibilities in contemporary dance.*

*We worked on this Biennial mobilizing potential affectionate circles, inspired by the joy I felt talking about dance with Mr. Antonio Carlos, an employee at Sesc Campinas' store, after an activity carried out with Sesc's staff.*

*May joy (always) be our litmus test!*

**Cláudia Müller**

*Artist with projects in dance, performance, video and installation.*

## A I C N Â L U B M A

AICNÂLUBMA – Wagner Schwartz

Um telefonema.

Do outro lado, é possível ouvir os parabéns  
[de uma festa de aniversário  
enquanto Claudia Garcia me dá a notícia  
[de que ela e Fabricio Floro  
pensaram em mim para ser o curador convidado  
da programação artística da  
10ª Bienal Sesc de Dança.

Do lado de cá, a decisão é rápida  
[considerando a aproximação  
com profissionais e com uma instituição  
[que respeito,  
com projetos que elaboram  
[a criação contemporânea.

Passar ao ato.

Nosso primeiro encontro acontece  
[na unidade Sesc Campinas,  
[durante quatro dias.  
Concentrados em uma pequena sala,  
[nos ocupamos dos convidados,  
[das inscrições.

Do lado de fora, um Brasil torto e tumultuado.

Várias ideias sobre curadoria surgem entre nós  
[e são tantas  
[que precisam ser reduzidas.  
Muitos são os artistas  
[que gostaríamos de programar.  
Grande é a vontade  
[de criar um espaço de convívio,  
[diferente do que hoje se vê nas ruas.  
Mas a assistência é emergencial.

Nas mãos, projetos contaminados pelo combate

*A phone call.*

*On the other side, I can hear the celebration  
[of a birthday party  
while Claudia Garcia gives me the news  
[that Fabricio Loro and her  
have chosen me as guest curator  
of artistic programming  
for the 10<sup>th</sup> Sesc Dance Biennial.*

*Over here the decision is quick  
[considering the opportunity to be close  
to professionals and an institution  
[I respect,  
with projects that foster  
[contemporary production.*

*Onwards to action.*

*Our first meeting happens  
[at Sesc Campinas,  
[lasting four days.  
Gathered in a small room,  
[we dealt with guests,  
[with registration.*

*Outside, a crooked and troubled Brazil.*

*We have several ideas about curatorship  
[so many  
[that they need to be summarized.  
So many artists  
[we would like to program.  
Great is the will  
[to create a social space,  
[unlike what is currently seen in the streets.  
But this is an emergency.*

*In our hands, projects contaminated by the struggle*

[ao racismo, à misoginia, à homofobia  
[e a tantos outros apegos enfermos,  
[agora, destinados a um só evento.  
A necessidade-de-promover-ações-artisticas  
[questiona o Estado,  
[sua métrica,  
[sua rima.

Falta fôlego, continuidade, espaço, investimento  
[para a produção local.

E mesmo que a alegria apareça nas entrelinhas  
[dos projetos artísticos,  
é preciso lidar com o duplo usurpador  
[de sua identidade fulgurante,  
[que vigia, quer descontextualizar.

A arte não caminha pela rua  
[com a mesma velocidade  
[daqueles que estão na rua.

Artistas precisam de lugares preparados  
[para receber seus objetos  
[que trazem, na fragilidade  
[de serem socialmente  
incompreendidos,

[a força de seu argumento transitivo.

(...)

Após os encontros na Rua Dom José  
Longas trocas de e-mails deram tônus  
[às nossas decisões,  
[permeadas pelas vozes dos agentes  
[de uma instituição que consolida  
[o trabalho daqueles  
[que chegam até ela.

A 10ª Bienal Sesc de Dança recebe cuidados  
[do outono ao inverno.

A arte permanece de olhos abertos.

**Wagner Schwartz**

Dança e escreve, em São Paulo e Paris. Seus projetos  
problematizam as relações artísticas e seu percurso.

[against racism, against misogyny,  
against homophobia

[and so many other sick attachments,  
[now destined for a single event.

The need-to-promote-artistic-actions  
[questioning the State,  
[its metric,  
[its rhyme.

Its lack of stamina, continuity, space,  
[investment in local productions.

And even if joy appears between the lines  
[of the artistic projects,  
it is necessary to deal with the double usurper  
[his flashing identity,  
[watching over, aiming to decontextualize.

Art doesn't walk down the street  
[with the same speed  
[of the people in the streets.

Artists need places equipped  
[to receive their objects  
[carrying, in the fragility  
[of being socially misunderstood,  
[the strength of their transitive argument.

(...)

After gatherings at Dom José street  
Long e-mail exchanges have resulted  
[in our decisions,  
[permeated by the voices of agents  
[of an institution that consolidates  
[the work of those  
[that come to it.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Sesc Dance Biennial is cared for  
[by autumn and winter.

Art remains open-eyed.

**Wagner Schwartz**

Dances and writes in São Paulo and Paris. His projects  
problematize artistic relationships and their paths.