

HOUSES, NOT PALACES

Toward a Useful but Disobedient Art

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Art and politics have always had an intense love-hate relationship. Artists positioned themselves between servile obedience to the powers-that-be and critical distance, between constructive cooperation and outright antagonism. There is no way to place oneself outside the empire, even as an artist. But still: politically or socially engaged art is more than mere relational reflection or esthetics. It does not only want change; it wants to be an active part of this change. It is not by chance that the artistic tools used in this struggle are often developed, or at least radicalized, at moments of social turmoil, at moments when the relationship between art and society is at a turning point in general: right before and after WWI (Dada, futurism, constructivism...), the 1960s, and the early 1970s (performance, concept, installation art...) — these were times of artistic and philosophical but also political avantgardes.

So it is not surprising that politically and socially engaged art gained fresh momentum after 1989, with the fall of the Eastern Bloc, the end of the Cold War, the acceleration of capitalism and the corresponding rise of anti or alterglobalization movements. But only with the manifold political and economic crises all over the world in the last couple of years has the idea of activist art become more pointed and recently a main topic even within the more mainstream contemporary art world. Whether in Tahrir, Zuccotti, Syntagma, Taksim, or Majdan Squares, in front of the Kremlin, in Japan after Fukushima, or in the midst of the iconic architecture of Brasilia, artists are always among the first to get involved. But one question constantly reoccurs: what role should art play in this?

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