A Look Back at 2011, the Year of Art and Protest

by Ben Davis
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#Occupy Bat Signal's video projections on the side of the Verizon building, November 17th
(Video still courtesy of Mark Read)

I began my Interventions column a year ago with a piece about the student protests in the U.K. called "What London's Student Protests Mean for the Future of Art," arguing that the spectacle of young people fighting against tuition hikes had to be deemed at least as important as the commerical frenzy at the art fairs in Miami. I don't think I could have possibly anticipated how right that particular piece would be, or how near that "future" was.

This year has produced its share of memorable artworks, both epic (Ryoji Ikeda's installation at the Park Avenue Armory) and intimate (Karl Haendel's "Questions for My Father" at Harris Lieberman). There was certainly room for fun this year: I wrote about James Franco at the Oscars and Google's attempt to put the world's museums online, criticized Richard Phillips's film of Lindsay Lohan and defended "the hipster." Heck, I even wrote a love advice column. But the enduring thing about the visual arts in 2011 — what made it, in fact, a unique year —

was that it was a year of protest. There are always a few decent works of art, one or two landmarks to hand forward to the art history textbooks. But this year was unique in that it was the year that the art world *marched*. Parts of it, at least.

1.

It began with the Culture Wars Redux, spurred by the Smithsonian's decision to cave in to pressure from Republicans and religious conservatives and censor the late David Wojnarowicz's "A Fire in My Belly" from the National Portrait Gallery's "Hide/Seek" show about gay identity in art history. Days before Christmas 2010, anger over the censorship had pushed outraged New Yorkers into the streets for a protest outside the Smithsonian-run Cooper-Hewitt, and this brouhaha continued to dominate the discussion in the early days of the new year. On January 20, a group of anti-censorship protesters called L.A. Raw dogged Smithsonian head G. Wayne Clough in Los Angeles, holding a funeral procession for free speech, while in D.C. a group called Art+ condemned him outside a meeting of his institution's board of regents at the end of the month. Art groups nationwide, too, had united against the Smithsonian's action, with museums from MoMA (which responded by pointedly acquiring "A Fire in My Belly" for its collection) to the Courtauld in London decrying the censorship, and the Warhol, Calder, and Mapplethorpe foundations withdrawing support from the D.C. institution.

Ultimately, the Smithsonian mostly succeeded in muffling the affair, deflecting the discussion with a stage-managed panel on free speech in April that satisfied no one (though even there, Clough had to face an activist who attempted to hang a cardboard sign reading "Censor" around his neck). The controversy simmered, and eventually died down. When at length "Hide/Seek" returned to the Brooklyn Museum last month, with "A Fire in My Belly" defiantly in it, Catholic conservatives tried to whip up a tizzy, to little effect (one deliberately offensive caricature of Brooklyn museum director Arnold Lehman on a toilet bowl installed in the office of the Staten Island borough president notwithstanding). But then again, by that time, the political landscape in the United States had completely changed.

2.

If the "Hide/Seek" uproar seemed like something dredged up out of the past, it was soon superseded by a very contemporary outrage that would dominate the center of

discussion in the spring. As part of its most sustained crackdown on dissident voices since Tiananmen Square, the Chinese government had already been escalating its alarming harassment of artist Ai Weiwei, demolishing his Shanghai studio in the early days of January. On April 3, authorities at last moved to silence him, detaining the artist as he was boarding a plane to Hong Kong. He was held without word, forcing his family to guess helplessly at his fate as state news sources slowly leaked out hints at what he was charged with. At last, in May, his captors settled on tax evasion, after floating trial balloons about bigamy and plagiarism.

No artist in recent memory had used their position as a public figure to similarly outspoken political ends, or taken on a similar international status, at least not in a way that really mattered. The touchingly intransigent Ai became an instant icon of dissent. And now the art world's political muscles, only recently begun to flex again, really began to go to work. A global array of art supporters piped up for Ai. The Guggenheim spearheaded a petition with Change.org that drew in famous names and some 140,000 others (and faced cyberattack from China). The Tate, recently the host of the Chinese artist's flashy "Sunflower Seeds" installation, threw up the message "Release Ai Weiwei" on an exterior wall. On April 18, the public art organization Creative Time even organized a daft but inspiring global day of protest for the artist that had supporters hauling chairs to "sit in" in front of Chinese embassies around the world, a bit of street theater inspired by the artist's own "Fairytale" installation.

Ai Weiwei was released on June 22, after 80 days under "house arrest." Though he remains under probation of a sort and cannot leave Beijing without permission, he has continued to find ways to annoy the authorities. It cannot be argued that the international outporing of support from his fans didn't have an effect.

3.

Why did China choose that particular moment to go after Ai Weiwei? The answer, it seemed, lay in the Middle East. The shockwaves of the Arab Spring were spreading around the world, making autocratic regimes everywhere jumpy. The Tunisian dictatorship of Ben Ali had fallen on January 14. Then came the outpouring of struggle in Egypt against the hated regime of Hosni Mubarak. Tahrir Square became the site of heroic battles against government thugs, as well as poignant scenes of on-the-fly creativity from normal Egyptians as they reclaimed their voices and held their

ground during a "Week of Steadfastness." On February 11, the dictatorship at last caved, and Tahrir Square became the new global icon of people power. (Though, it bears mentioning, the revolution's gains are currently threatened by the military's crackdown.)

For professional artists, who participated enthusiastically in the uprising, the experience was transformative. "My heart is in Egypt," the artist Nadine Hammam told me at Art Dubai, where she sported a shirt that said “Egyptian and Proud.” Still flushed from the protests in Tahrir, but urgently warning of the battles to come, she spoke poignantly of the sense of unity on display in Tahrir. In the immediate aftermath of the Mubarak's ouster, ARTINFO ran Egyptian artist Ganzeer’s portraits of the uprising’s martyrs. Among them was 32-year-old sound artist and art professor Ahmed Bassiony, killed in the early stages of the uprising by the dictator's security forces. In the summer, Bassiony's work would represent Egypt at the Venice Biennale, alongside footage he had taken of the protests.

Even where autocracies held firm, as in the United Arab Emirates, public discourse was affected by the explosion of protest across the region. The Sharjah Biennale was hit with scandal, and its director Jack Persekian summarily terminated, when a work by Algerian artist and writer Mustapha Benfodil proved controversial. Meanwhile, a coalition of international artists led by Emily Jacir and Walid Raad (whom I interviewed) issued a call for a boycott of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi until working conditions for the largely South Asian guest workers at the building site were improved.

4.

The tremendous impact of the Arab Spring was not limited to far-off lands. In the United States, the year saw renewed attacks on government services as the new Age of Austerity sank in. Some politicians, like Kansas governor Sam Brownback, used the occasion to go after art, eliminating the state art commission and outraging art supporters. (In general, art funding remained the symbolic face of government waste for conservatives.) But in Wisconsin these attacks took a particularly nasty form, with governor Scott Walker going after public-sector workers’ right to bargain collectively. The popular response, a spirited, weeks-long occupation of the capital, was breathtaking — and directly inspired by Egypt (“Fight Like an Egyptian” was one sign). In a small-scale echo of the grassroots creativity in Tahrir Square, artists of all

kinds pitched in, organizing solidarity art shows and artistic gestures of support, my favorite being the large, jagged wooden sculpture of an upraised fist quickly erected by University of Wisconsin studio art grad students.

The occupation in Madison ended on March 3, but left an indelible mark on public sentiment. How would this affect art? The tradition of brainy, insular 'political art' in the art world could only look somewhat anemic when set alongside these types of explosive current events (summer brought the object lesson of Allora & Calzadilla's "Gloria" installation at the Venice Biennale, both bombastic and shallow in its State Department-sponsored critique of U.S. power, featuring an Olympic athlete using a tank as a treadmill). But the art world's long-held political pretentions were now dipping dangerously close to reality. In retrospect, the outrage released by the Wojnarowicz and Ai battles, combined with the righteous popular outrage triggered by Madison, seems to have foreshadowed the birth of the Occupy Wall Street movement in September. When the venerable Canadian culture-jamming magazine Adbusters first formulated the #OccupyWallStreet meme, no one could have imagined that it would take off in quite the way it did. But the idea hit the right post-Tahrir note of defiance, and intersected with forces both organized and spontaneous amid the gathering unease of an economic crisis that won't go away.

Artists participated prominently in this anarchic, creative protest (prominently enough that I felt it appropriate to write some cautionary lessons from the experience of the Situationists in '68). Art shows were organized, and various art-focused groups spun off, including the controversial Occupy Museums initiative and OWS Arts and Labor, which went about organizing to expose abusive labor conditions in art. As in Madison, the homespun creativity of the movement's cardboard signs became an object of intense identification. (Not long after it started, the New York Historical Society started archiving the movement's documents for posterity.)

The outburst of creative activism came not a moment too soon — not least for the hard-pressed, heroic art handlers at Sotheby's, who faced their longest-ever lock-out even as the auction goliath had its best year ever. No better symbol of the divergent fortunes of the rich from the rest could be imagined. Sotheby's evening sales became targets of rowdy protests, with solidarity from OWS and its various art working groups. Diana Taylor, the girlfriend of New York mayor Michael Bloomberg and a member of Sotheby's board, became one of the year's most hissable villains,

publicly informing art handlers who confronted her that she had told Sotheby's CEO that "if he accedes to any of your demands, I will resign immediately."

As for the Billionaire Mayor himself, Bloomberg went from uttering fine, lofty-sounding words about the sacredness of free speech and New York as a haven for dissent, upon the unveiling of an Ai Weiwei public artwork in the summer, to ordering the clean-out of Zuccotti Park on the thinnest of pretenses in mid-November. The 4,000-book "People's Library," a symbol of the movement's nascent grassroots counterculture, was hauled away like trash by NYPD riot squads.

5.

What, at last, was the year's iconic image or work of art? You could make a case for Christian Marclay's "The Clock," his epic 24-hour work harvesting a century's work of film clips into one magnificent montage, which drew real crowds when it showed in New York at Paula Cooper Gallery in the spring and won an award in Venice. Wunderkind Ryan Trecartin was incredibly well reviewed for "Any Ever," a manic series of films at MoMA PS1 that offered a memorable portrait of the polymorphous, info-saturated Internet age and its discontents.

But if you accept my argument that 2011 was the year of art and protest, then, as far as I am concerned, there is only really one contender for the crown of the year's most emblematic work, the artistic gesture that stood for its rebel aspirations and its thwarted dreams. And this was the so-called "Occupy Bat Signal," the giant light projection cast upon the side of the Verizon Building as crowds streamed across the Brooklyn Bridge on November 17, two days after Bloomberg ordered the sneak raid on the Occupy Wall Street encampment.

The light piece consisted of projected slogans from the movement — it began with the words "Mic Check," a nod to the "people's mic" call-and-repeat technique that has become the movement's hallmarks. It flickered through the names of all the encampments around the country and the world that had been inspired by OWS. I love the way the work reclaims the Batman myth, which is always, under the surface, a fantasy that would make Ron Paul happy (billionaire vigilante saves the day by taking the law into his own hands). We, the majority — the 99 percent, in the parlance of the day — are going to have to be our own heroes. That was its simple message of this rough-and-ready art intervention.

It was executed using a high-end projector but held together with ragged ingenuity: “The whole thing was a combination of high tech and super jerry-rigging on the fly,” Mark Read, one of its creators (along with Max Nova), told BoingBoing. That nicely sums up the year's mix of high and low, of artists being pushed beyond their comfort levels to new things. And the project signified something else, too. The signal was projected from the home of Denise Vega, a single working mother of three who donated her apartment in a nearby housing project for free, showing how the events of 2011 might just open up new channels between art and a public that goes beyond the typical gallery crowd. In other words, the projection stood as a luminous signal that art can have *relevance* to large numbers of people, even though the road to get there may be dark and difficult. “I can't charge you money,” Vega is supposed to have said when offered money for hosting the guerilla work of art, "this is for the people."

Two days before, like thousands of others who had signed up to get the text alert, I got the message at 1:07 a.m. that police were massing to clean out Zuccotti Park. Like hundreds of others, I rushed there. I saw the NYPD hit people with batons, hose people in the eyes with pepper spray, and drag people out of the crowd to arrest them for talking back. We were pressed against riot shields and threatened with arrest for trying to bear witness to what was happening in the park. It was a ruthless display of force designed to make people who dared to think they might take part in making the world a better place feel small and disempowered and scared. And I'll admit it worked. I felt scared.

So when Read and Nova's light projection flashed the simple slogan, “Do Not Be Afraid,” that meant something.

It’s been quite a year, a messy and confusing year, a year of a lot of false starts and inspiring firsts, lingering injustices but also bursts of heroism and beauty. I don't know what the future holds, but you can't say that we are in the same place at the end of 2011 as we were at its start. So it strikes me that another slogan from the light projection is a fitting epitaph for the year that was: “This is the Beginning of the Beginning.” Probably so.

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