

When? Where? How?

My first reaction to your question about art and protest is to distrust generalizations about strategies and outcomes. Today there exist societies and cultures in which art facilitates protest and leads to change. Those where artists are imprisoned, exhibitions closed down, works destroyed, and exchanges stifled may be cases in point. Although tyranny, imperialism, militarism, social and economic inequality, and attempts to control thought and behavior are neither necessary nor sufficient for protest art to emerge, they frequently catalyze it.

These forms of domination remain omnipresent in the contemporary world, yet the surfeit of information, culture, experiences, and consumer choices that confronts citizens of industrialized democracies has become a double-edged sword that simultaneously creates opportunities for protest and diminishes their significance. Indeed, the mind-spinning increase in modes of activism (global consumer boycotts, social media campaigns) and the proliferation of agents (corporations, Internet service providers, NGOs) taxes existing vocabulary and may well render a single definition of protest an anachronism. My judgment and standards may need to be recalibrated if I am to perceive forms of current protest.

Invoking history may be part of the problem rather than the solution. Nostalgia for clearly defined enemies (Nazism) or the veneration of earlier historical avant-gardes (the cultural experimentation following the Russian Revolution) increasingly strike me as irrelevant to protest art in the present. Studying history is an intrinsically valuable pursuit, yet as Hayden White brilliantly argues in his recent book *The Practical Past*, the historical record (regardless of what one takes it to be) has no essential substance and provides no foundation from which to act in the present. The fascination that past instances of art and protest hold for me today typically follows from their success as works of art, not as political projects.

My recent experience editing the book *Facing the Music: Documenting Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Redevelopment of Downtown Los Angeles, A Project by Allan Sekula*, suggests just how thorny these issues become when they engage architecture. Several years before the construction of the Gehry building, the late photographer (and my close friend) Allan Sekula convened a group of artists to document its construction and opening. Sekula had emerged as a vehement critic of what he believed to be the spectacular excess of Gehry's architecture. The video "Gala" that he exhibited during the 2005 exhibition *Facing the Music* at the REDCAT Gallery in Disney Hall was a physiognomic investigation of the patron class of Los Angeles attending the opening night celebration of the building.

After Venezuelan conductor Gustavo Dudamel was hired as Music Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2009, he became deeply committed to the Los Angeles Youth Orchestra and to introducing a robust system of musical pedagogy into the Los Angeles public school system. The children and young adults who perform in Disney Hall and the members of the community who flock to hear them have made the building a popular destination. Discovering this instance of what Henri Lefebvre calls the “appropriation” of a space has made me more wary about deploying notions such as spectacle.

Social misery in every form persists in Los Angeles, and I continue to appreciate local artists who document it in their work. Yet a growing sense of doubt has begun to gnaw at me. Today I believe that pressing for reforms in tax codes and the re-institution of the progressive income tax abolished by Ronald Reagan that would enable massive increases in spending for education, health care, and housing are the great political challenges of our age. Contemporary economic inequality has received considerable scholarly and media attention. Artists such as Sekula have treated it as well. Shall we not follow their lead and make it the major topic for protest art in the United States?