

# Making Themselves Useful

Artists, activism, and political realities

BY ROBIN CEMBALEST

At the Queens Museum of Art last year, Tania Bruguera installed a piece that looked just like Duchamp's *Fountain*—same model of urinal, same "R. Mutt" signature. The crucial difference: this one was in a men's room, and it worked.

"You can see it, and you can pee in it," she told a crowd assembled in a



▲ A Konbit shelter in Haiti, part of a project spearheaded by artists Swoon and Ben Wolf in 2010.

storefront in Corona, Queens, the neighborhood where she's based this year. It's the headquarters of Immigrant Movement International, a project she conceived as an "artist-initiated sociopolitical movement." Presented by Creative Time and the Queens Museum and financed by the Annenberg Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and others,

the project is intended to operate at the juncture of art, politics, and community, examining and hopefully improving conditions in immigrants' lives.

That day, however, a mostly art-world audience had gathered to discuss Bruguera's concept of "useful art." Presenters included Mel Chin, who is lobbying to get lead out of New Orleans soil; Rick Lowe, who built Houston's "Project Row Houses"; and France's Patrick Bernier and Olive Martin, who try to prevent deportations by claiming that immigrants are artists and writers.

The crowd wrestled with challenging questions: What specific qualities do artists bring to politics? What criteria should be used to judge "useful art"—both as art and as effective activism? Can artists working on immigration, pollution, and housing be part of the solution? Or, by also participating in museums and the market, are they just part of the system like everyone else? Can artists save the world? If they don't try, what's the alternative?

While the discussion didn't yield firm answers, it certainly helped clarify the questions at an urgent moment. Artists have acted as activists for centuries. But it seems that more and more artists around the world are devising projects that harness their creative sensibilities—and, significantly, their international profiles—to both raise awareness and improve living conditions. Swoon and Ben Wolf, for example, helped build shelters in Haiti. Vik Muniz advocates for Brazil's garbage pickers. Most famously—and ominously—Ai Weiwei criticized shoddy construction in schools in China's earthquake zones, along with other government policies, resulting in his detention last April.

The art world swiftly and unilaterally denounced his arrest, and the Guggenheim launched an online petition demanding Ai's release. Whether Chinese officials will see it is an open question. But again, what's the alternative? The petition keeps the story alive and lets people feel their voices are heard, at least by someone. The prospect of more tangible measures—sanctions or a boycott—was regarded by several museum directors I spoke to

as beyond the bounds of feasibility, given the realities of traveling shows and loans, among other cultural, political, and financial entanglements.

But others are considering boycotts as a strategic option for activism. A group organized by artists Walid Raad and Emily Jacir released a petition demanding closer regulation of labor conditions for migrant workers at the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi; some signers are already boycotting the museum until "fully verifiable procedures" are in place. The museum responded that Human Rights Watch paints an "inaccurate picture" of the progress it has made and continues to make. Another petition was launched by anonymous artists to protest the firing of Sharjah Art Foundation's director, Jack Persekian, over a purportedly offensive piece in the emirate's biennial this past spring. Some signers of that petition have also raised the possibility of a future boycott.

It's clear from these efforts that as centers of power in the art world emerge beyond its longtime traditional capitals, questions of how to evaluate and influence human-rights issues have become more complicated. "I don't think these are the last petitions we'll see," says Creative Time chief curator Nato Thompson, likening them to social-network activism in the Middle East. "Artists are finding they can organize and have power in a way they didn't used to. They're finding ways their community can demand ethical behavior."

But each campaign is fraught with its own complexities. Are the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi's conditions worse than those at other museums around the developing world? Will a boycott sever lines of communication with foreign institutions? Are there times when the solutions can become part of the problem? Can the art world really influence China's human-rights policy?

Thompson, for one, doesn't have any illusions. "I don't think it's going to be a quick fix," he says. "But when is it ever?" ■

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