

HYPERALLERGIC

EVENTS

Tania Bruguera, Hank Willis Thomas, and Eric Gottesman on Making Art in Times of Turmoil

The final event in the Hirshhorn Museum's Ai Weiwei series will discuss the challenges and necessity of art making amid political turmoil.

Laila Pedro | 20 hours ago



A For Freedoms billboard near Pearl, Mississippi (photo courtesy For Freedoms)

Making art in contentious political times is, to put it mildly, a tricky proposition. There can be great generative potential in cataclysmic moments (as in Dada and Surrealism during and after the First World War), or there can be art that fails to hit the right note or simply doesn't land. Nobody embodies the potential and pitfalls of making politically explicit artworks like Ai Weiwei, who has created some profoundly affecting interventions into human rights and political abuses; while rightly venerated for heroic activism and superb works, he's also courted controversy, like the infamous photo where he posed himself as a drowned Syrian child on a beach.

In our current moment of lunacy (the political crisis may have precedent, but its sheer appalling absurdity does not), artists are faced with the double-edged opportunity to make work in response to, against, about, or simply in the context of a story that is bigger than the White House's current occupant and brings to the surface the full rot of American history.

How they take on that responsibility is a difficult question, one the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, is addressing with *In Conversation: Awareness, Action and Dissent*, a series of panels around Ai's current show, *Ai Weiwei: Trace at Hirshhorn*, which continues at the museum through January 1. In the first installment in October, Nato Thompson, the erstwhile artistic director of Creative Time who now heads Philadelphia Contemporary, led a conversation with artists Laurie Jo Reynolds, Pedro Reyes, and Paul Ramírez Jonas on how their art directly confronts legislative and social issues and engages contemporary audiences. This final event, taking place tomorrow, features *New Yorker* journalist and former Beijing bureau chief Evan Osnos moderating a discussion between artists Tania Bruguera, Hank Willis Thomas, and Eric Gottesman.

All three are examples of artists who produce urgently relevant work that responds with immediacy and effectiveness to its political and historical context; and all three offer enervating, timely takes on the



Semi3n S3nderov @S3nderov RT - Dic 30
Yo Tambien Exijo así ha quedado hoy la plaza de la revoluci3n de la Habana... periodistas, policia y turistas
pic.twitter.com/h3ab3yA0vE

Havana's Plaza de la Revoluci3n on the day of Tania Bruguera's participatory performance piece "#Yotambienexijo" in 2015 (photo by Semi3n S3nderov/Twitter)

present state of art and politics. Bruguera, a Cuban installation and performance artist who has long grappled with questions of censorship in authoritarian contexts, sees the potential and responsibility of engaging artistically at critical political moments. I asked Bruguera about the role of art right now, and she responded that "the moment has come for all to use art as a tool to defend the right to have our own political imaginary." In our cacophonous and frightening climate, Bruguera added, "art can be a way to give people tools to navigate chaos without fear."

Thomas and Gottesman, for their part, are the creators of For Freedoms, an artist-run "Super PAC" that has commented on political and

racial issues across the country with billboards and other public interventions. When I asked the two about how artists can enact, effect, or inspire resistance in oppressive times, Gottesman spoke to the necessity of putting art out into the world, making it a significant part of the political conversation:

We who have discussions in museums know that art and politics overlap and are in fact the same thing. What we are trying to do is not necessarily evangelize about this but rather to convert art into a real political force to be reckoned with in our country, and around the world.

Why are we resorting to conversations about the nature of our democracy right now? What is the real threat to our democracy right now? It's not one person. It is some sort of phenomenon that is part of what is happening worldwide, related to a new sense of nationalism, that is also causing citizens tremendous unease. Art is supposed to be uneasy. It is supposed to trouble. So it seems to me that we have a unique training in how to be comfortable with unease.

For a country in the midst of roiling turmoil, with no clear end in sight, it's refreshing and even motivating to be reminded that art has the potential — and perhaps the responsibility — to short-circuit the nightmare. As Thomas told me, “This is a time to be visionary, not reactionary. That is why it is imperative that all creative people and critical thinkers are civically engaged.”

The fourth and final installment of In Conversation: Awareness, Action, and Dissent (Part II) takes place Thursday, December 14, 6:30–7:30 pm in the Ring Auditorium at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC.