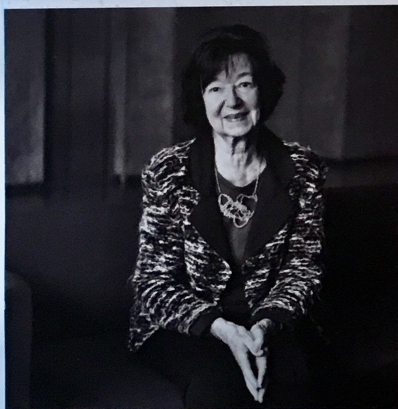


Taking a Stand:

ARTISTS AS ACTIVISTS

By Charlotta Kotik



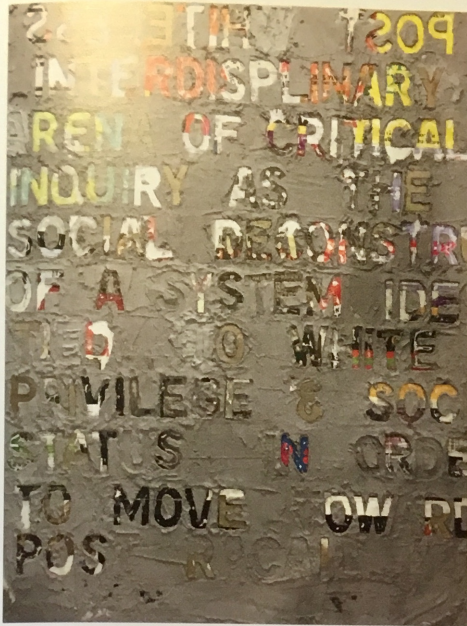
Author Charlotta Kotik

Top: David Černý, Czech, b. 1967
Red Skull, 2017
Polymer Resin Assemblage
and LED lighting
55 x 39 x 4 in.

Artwork by David Černý, courtesy of
Hohmann Fine Art (www.hohmann.art/cerny)

Most artists are iconoclasts by nature. Together with scientists, they share the need to question generally accepted ideas, whether pertaining to prevailing aesthetic taste, the political structure of the society they are part of, or the accepted data of scientific discipline. The urge to discover formal configurations as yet untested, to establish new approaches, and ultimately alter general consciousness, lead them toward the intense questioning of the status quo. In order to create the new, to seek their own independent expression, they are inadvertently in a state of opposition. Mainly it is the set of artificially created societal rules, designed by often harsh, exploitative political structures that give artists frequent topics for critical ideas and investigations. It is happening especially in times when ruling powers are creating and enforcing nonsensical laws that oppress large segments of populations and hinder whole countries from creating more just and equitable systems. In situations such as these, artists' voices are an important catalysts for change. The very events of 1989 that began the dissolution of the Soviet block would not have been possible without the participation of the artists who brought keen awareness of the ills of the reigning Communist doctrine to the world's attention.

In the former Czechoslovakia, David Černý almost innocently highlighted the overpowering domination perpetrated by the Soviet Union over a large swath of Central and Eastern Europe. In Smichov (within Prague) there was a monumental sculptural tribute erected to celebrate the liberation of Prague by the Red Army in 1945. There a Soviet tank was elevated on



a massive stone platform to remind everyone of their debt to the Soviet Union for the country's liberation from the Nazi oppression during WWII. After the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 when Russian tanks rolled through the country, effectively ending a utopian attempt to reform socialism during the Prague Spring and Dubcek's dream of Socialism with a Human Face. The meaning of the tank looming over public space was clear — it spelled domination, not liberation. However it took another 20-plus years to address the issue and it was David Černý, who undertook the task with courage and a large dose of humor. One late night in April 1991, he assembled his trusted friends, got a couple of step ladders, and with ferocious speed began painting the tank angelic pink. When the regular police patrol drove by and questioned the activity, he produced a homemade document that stated he was preparing the tank for the next day's film shoot. *Tank* remained pink and much public discussion ensued, some feeling the act was defiling the heroic heritage, but many more breathing a sigh of relief at the ultimate transformation of the object that, according to the artist, "no longer stirs up terror, but can also bring delight." And delight it was for thousand of visitors to the site who felt the Velvet Revolution of 1989 truly brought a long desired change.

Černý's act allowed others to pose questions that were until then unheard of and opened a large civic discussion. It also brought much attention to the function of an artist within a society. Černý continues creating more large public monuments as well as smaller pieces that all address pertinent issues of today.

Chinese artist Ai Weiwei is a worldwide celebrity as well as one of the most controversial of contemporary Chinese artists. His work straddles media and his exhibitions are mounted on all continents in major institutions that also avidly collect his work. Ai Weiwei's criticism of Chinese governmental policies that often curb individual freedoms brought him an endless stream of problems in his own country while his international acclaim grew. He considers the rapid industrial development of China destructive to the rich cultural heritage and while the overproduction of cheap Chinese products floods the world market, the exquisite traditional craftsmanship is dying. A number of years

Top left: Jc Lenochan, American, b. 1970
"new human' in undoing whiteness.," 2019
 Mixed media
 62 x 50 in.
 Courtesy of JcL Studios

Top right: David Černý, Czech, b. 1967
Suitcase II, 2013
 Polymer resin assemblage
 16 x 21 x 6 in.
 Artwork by David Černý, courtesy of
 Hohmann Fine Art (www.hohmann.art/cerny)

Ai Weiwei, Chinese, b. 1957
Self-Portrait in LEGO, 2017
 LEGO bricks
 15 x 15 in.
 Courtesy Des Moines Art Center
 Photo Credit: Rich Sanders, Des Moines





Top: Hong Hao, Chinese, b.1965
My Things No. 3, 2001 – 2002
 Scanned color photograph
 50 x 85 in.
 Courtesy of the Artist and Chambers Fine Art

Above: Ai Weiwei, Chinese, b.1957
Table with Two Legs on the Wall, 2004
 Wood
 50.875 x 44.125 x 39.375 in.
 Private Collection

ago, Ai Weiwei began disassembling historical furniture only to reassemble it in new often-fantastical shapes while always honoring the traditional woodworking methods and materials. *Table* still resembles a table, however its utilitarian function is subverted and the piece is elevated into the realm of sculpture. In many of his large works, Ai Weiwei points out the governmental disregard of the living conditions of his countrymen.

The photographic work of Hong Hao highlights the issue of fast production and the problems of the resulting waste. Studying filmmaking and photography simultaneously, Hao mastered many newly available technical processes and employed them brilliantly in large colorful compositions. Seductive in appearance, they are nevertheless urgent reminders of the suffocating effect of overproduction and overconsumption and its dire consequences on our environment.

As we witness the never ending turmoil in the Middle East — where the dangerously unresolved issues of the coexistence of Israel and the Palestinian State fuel violence on both sides — it is often the ordinary citizens caught in the political entanglements of history that suffer the most. Palestinian artist Emily Jacir brings our attention to events in the lives of many of her countrymen subjected to the unnecessary hardships due to state bureaucracy. Often employed as a tool of oppression, it can elevate the ordinary tasks into the realm of struggle between the state and its citizens.

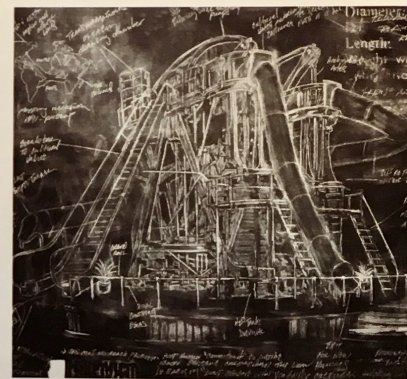
Going to a post office becomes a complicated task under the best of circumstances as we see through the eyes of Mahmoud, protagonist of one of Jacir's pieces. He was born in a Palestinian refugee camp and is forbidden to go to Jerusalem, where the closest post office is located. Thus he depends on the kindness of strangers to pay his bills to Israeli authorities in the Israeli territory he cannot access himself. The restrictions on individual movements also affect Munir, portrayed in another of Jacir's work. People of diverse religions all over the world honor their loved ones in life and in death. Munir, who lives in Bethlehem, goes to her mother's grave in Jerusalem to bring flowers and to pray on the anniversary of her death. However sometimes she is denied the entry permit to the very city where her mother was actually born. A myriad of small everyday occurrences such as these ignite bitterness and fuel conflicts — conflicts that often reach tragic proportions and seem to be almost unresolvable.



Tania Bruguera addresses the lack of freedom of expression in Cuba in her iconic work *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana Version)*. Staged for the first time at the Havana Biennial in 2009, the piece provided an opportunity for visitors to speak uncensored for one minute to the surrounding audience. Ultimately a white dove was placed on the speaker's shoulder — as a reminder of a seminal event in the history of Cuba when a dove landed on the shoulder of Fidel Castro during his first speech in Havana after the victory of revolution in 1959. After the one-minute speech the protagonists were escorted away by actors in military uniforms — a grim reminder of the possible consequences. When attempting to re-enact the performance in Havana in 2014, Bruguera was detained prior to the event. A number of her supporters was arrested as well. Although released after only a few hours, it clearly spelled out the lack of freedom and the fallacy of the government claiming all is well and free. The unrealized performance garnered worldwide attention and became a hallmark in the history of politically engaged art. It attests to the power of art to focus on oppression of those living under an authoritarian regime and to reignite the struggle for positive change.

jc lenochan addresses persistence of racial inequality in the United States. His practice embraces multiple media while the artist strives to point out the ingrained prejudices. He firmly believes minds could be open to change through sensitive interpretation of past and present events and facts. jc poses questions about the institutionalized acquisition of knowledge that is often prejudicial and tainted with racism. He posits that through cultural research we can begin the deconstruction of stale and negative ideas and thus effectively utilize the transformative function of art. Deeply involved with education and social sciences, the artist advocates for “manipulating perspectives of dominant ideology, confronting of cultural bias, perception of otherness, and racial fabrication. Everything we see has a potential to become inexplicably something else in terms of justice and trans-pedagogy. Thinking and re-thinking possibilities through critical discourse in the canon of art history allows for an altered way of seeing the world, as a “new human’ in undoing whiteness.”

Kashmiri artist Malik Sajad dedicates his work to chronicling life in the India-controlled part of the Kashmir territory. Endowed with legendary natural beauty but fraught by political conflicts following the partition of India and



Top: Tania Bruguera, Cuban, b. 1968
Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana version), 2009
Video

Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Above: jc lenochan, American, b. 1970
De-structuralism “an attempt of de-racing a society,” 2016

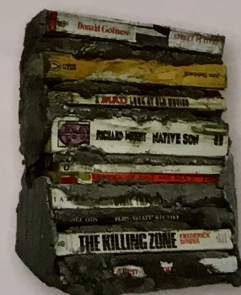
Chalk and charcoal pencil on canvas
40 x 50 in.

Courtesy of jcl studios

Below: jc lenochan, American, b. 1970
Street Players in the Killing Zone of White Mischief, 2015

Discarded paperbacks w/concrete
14 x 6 x 5 in.

Courtesy of jcl studios



OP-ART MALIK SAJAD

A Wedding Under Curfew

Three months after India revoked the autonomy of Kashmir and arrested thousands, its seven million residents are still forced to live without access to the internet.



Malik Sajad, a writer and visual artist, is the author of the graphic novel, "Mama: A Boy from Kashmir"

Pakistan in 1947, the everyday life in the "valley" is infinitely challenging. The complex history of this once thriving territory testifies to hardships imposed on ordinary lives by the political and religious conflict of two neighboring countries. Choosing to document seemingly insignificant every day events in the form of drawings, graphic novels, or straightforward cartoons, the artist highlights the crippling effect of extended periods of political and economic oppression on individual lives and the entire territory.

Through history, the artists we celebrate most were engaged with events in their time — always observing, frequently questioning, and often criticizing. When encountering negative developments their voices were indispensable reminders that change is needed if the world should remain a habitable place. In the current world fraught with migration crises, religious intolerance, impending climate change, and economic inequality artists are responding in multiple ways and in large numbers. Far from exhausting the vast lexicon of ideas and formal solutions, the National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library's *Artists as Activists* exhibition points toward just a small number of issues addressed in politically engaged art. Nevertheless, even this small segment shows the strength

Malik Sajad, Indian, b. 1986
A Wedding Under Curfew.
Op-Art by Malik Sajad for The New York Times, Sunday Review, Op-Art Section, p.2, November 10, 2019

of art growing from recognition of the urgent need for ethical solutions to existing troubling issues. And it is this very recognition that is a first step toward the search for general understanding that could ultimately result in the creation of a more balanced and unbiased future worldwide. ■