

So yes, we find ourselves in the situation of linking together contradictions and paradoxes. We are on stage while being on retreat, and we are hopeful while being under attack. In other words, we live in a state of a simultaneous *I Know*; *I Don't Know*; *I Care*; and *I'm Scared*.

In the Age of the Rat and the Bear, we maintain a more vulnerable relationship to knowledge. We don't reject the expertise of the *I Know* in favor of the anti-intellectualism of the *I Don't Know*, but we perform them both in the key of the *I Care*. We don't interpret the world as much as complicate it, with acts of emotional and intellectual incoherence. We perform the vulnerable, dangerous, and radical act of wearing our heart on our sleeve.

In the Age of the Rat and the Bear, we also find ourselves always in the compa-



Peter Fischli & David Weiss, *Der Rechte Weg* (The Right Way), 1982-83. © the artists. Courtesy: the artists; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zürich; Sprüth Magers, Berlin/London; Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

ny of others. Instead of policing our borders, we participate in the space of the common. There, people who care encounter people who care about something else, which involves an ethics of cohabitation: a fear that requires fearlessness, and a contested exchange that requires respect. To use a term resurrected by Michel Foucault, this demands an act of *parrhesia*, or speaking truth to power from a position of exposed vulnerability.

More than anything, the Age of the Rat and the Bear is a time to behave the way Martin Luther King Jr. called upon *all* people to behave: to be maladjusted. By evoking a term usually associated with a psychological defect or illness, Dr. King famously declared that he was proud to be maladjusted, and that he would never adjust himself to a society that engages in racial discrimination. In the art context, we can be proud to be maladjusted and not adjust ourselves to an art community obsessed with knowledge, power, and success. We can follow Fischli & Weiss' *The Right Way* (1983), where two talking animals roam through the Swiss countryside in a spirit of compassion, risk, and experimentation, performing dance moves instead of chess moves.

## Raimundas Malašauskas



\* Raimundas Malašauskas talks to Fatos Ustek who just came back from a silence retreat.

Fatos Ustek is curator and art critic & founding editor of *Nowiswere* (with Veronika Hauer), currently leading the project *Time Capsules and Conditions of Now* under the framework of Vision Forum.

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**RAIMUNDAS MALAŠAUSKAS:** What is an experience of silence together?

**FATOS USTEK:** The challenge is bigger. As well as the estrangement. It is not a singleton of a duration of depression. You are there... you see things and you only observe, you don't respond or recollect. You let things pass you by. I think it is the physical experience of the temporality of things, events, happenings, situations, occurrences, feelings, sensations. I need to add that you are not allowed to read, write, listen to songs or watch films, so basically there is no input and the exterior world is put on hold. When you are amongst others you are left to construct your private zone and actually only live in it, so you get to know the territory of your "self" – the walls of your world. And on the other side, it is a continuous process of alienation since you are mute and you are doomed to be mute – you cannot share anything and this is the challenge. You cannot victimize yourself or glorify some kind of joyous moments of presence. You are there on your own with your misery that cannot be communicated, hence cannot be shared, thus multiplied. You are in the sea of your solitude, swimming amidst other seas.

**RS:** Is it something to be done collectively rather than individually?

**FU:** I think so, I think you have to observe that others are also going through challenges and the people present do also have various kinds of misery that they suffer from. You can fictionalize on their stories, which allows you a space of play where you are not only with and within yourself on an obsessive level of exaggeration.

**RM:** What are the psychological effects of it?

**FU:** I can only talk about myself for this question. The effects are massive. I am not the same person who left for the retreat, and I came back to the life of



Fatos Ustek, *Gong*, 2011. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Lisa Skuret

\* Fatos Ustek



that person, so I feel like I jumped into another life of mine. This should not lead you to think I am suffering from MPD. It is just another form of reality... I had the chance to undo a knot – a grand narrative of my life story. This has liberated me on so many levels that I am not solid anymore... I hope this makes some sense.

**RM:** Is it about cognitive enhancement of the brain's powers?

**FU:** It is about depatterning the brain, and how the mind works and reacts. It is about observing the three possibilities of “now” that can lead to an attachment, an aversion or an indifference to specific experiences of the present moment. What happens is: you struggle so hard to get a moment of your self “unthinking” and just being, to not continue to reproduce your existing patterns and even strengthen them! And this revelation of the mind and matter leads to another stage of mind activity where your monkey mind starts to feel at ease. Some people experienced an absolute release of their body, as if they were no longer holding it up, but letting it be as it is. For that I need another retreat I guess, or some kind of dimensional shift. Ha!

**RM:** Do you identify a political dimension of it as well?

**FU:** Hmm, this is quite an uneasy question... can you elaborate further on what you posit as a political dimension?

**RM:** I guess I wonder whether this type of practice could be associated with withdrawal as a political gesture of not participating in compulsory communication.

**FU:** This form of not-participation does not produce the extreme disagreement with and reaction to the current flows. On the contrary, through your self you are bound to loosen your foundations of ego, and hence feel that you are part of something at large, and sublimation is at stake. Your significance of being and your act of not getting involved in any ordination of producing social domain does not lead to a signification, on the contrary it is a suggested unification. Thus, politically it has quite a unitarian perspective, where you do not react but observe all the unpleasant and disagreeable things, and if you even want to go further, you “wish well”...

**RM:** What was/is the most unexpected element of this process?

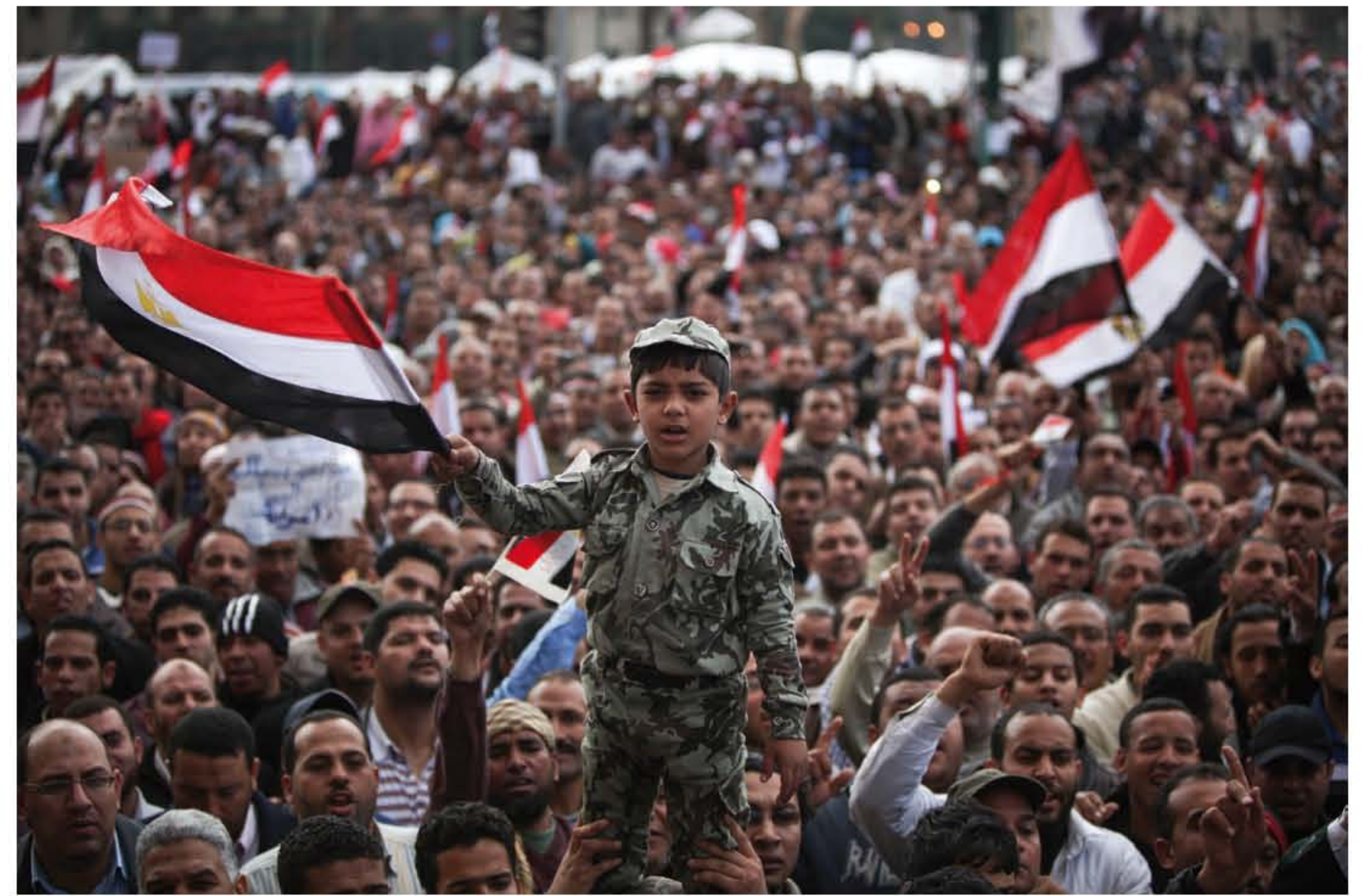
**FU:** When you are there you think every single day is a replica of the last. A kind of groundhog day feeling. And then something small happens – a tiny shift in the flow of things, that feels like a miracle. You experience a trembling feeling and your trust in the continuous change of things gets stronger. In other words, you get connected to life even more with small changes that occur unexpectedly. Or let me put it this way: your experience of being exterior to your world that is constructed there is only formed due to absolute refuge from interaction. Thus the feeling of presence – a reflection. For example, on the sixth day, in the aftermath of my “liberation”, I was still not convinced. Somehow it felt very easy, how I got to solve the relationship of things and managed to get a large-scale perception of my life. So skepticism was haunting me, and I was lying on a bench watching the clouds in the blue sky on a sunny late afternoon. I said “I am confused” and I paused – silently of course! Then out of the blue a rainbow appeared, though there were no traces of rain in the air, it must have been a small nomadic rain cloud, and there it was, a small rainbow just over my head. I am still moved recalling this. Yes, then came a huge feeling of relief and joy, the joy of being and being at ease and letting go. I loved it, I'm still loving it.

## João Ribas



If it is true that culture somehow finds itself “under siege; in a position of hope; in retreat; and on stage” *all at the same time*, this reflects an underlying condition for today's artistic practices. These must acknowledge that they can no longer sustain the illusion of a vantage point set apart “from the street and from the control room”. Rather than persisting in the belief in art's potential as an “activist cultural practice”, much of contemporary art affirms the fact that culture is simultaneously both “complicit *with* and an alternative *to*” hegemony and capital. This complicity is not merely to acquiesce to Theodor Adorno's caustic critique of the “idols of the market”, where forms of resistance are all offered as so many possibilities to be “snapped up”. It is to recognize that this very type of critique of capitalist culture has been subjected to reappropriation by contemporary forms of “iconoclasm and fundamentalist spectacle”. So

contemporary art finds itself under siege precisely because it is on stage: a rise in censorship and iconoclasm is clearly evident in the recent abrupt dismissal of Jack Persekian, Artistic Director of the Sharjah Biennial; in the “politics of disgust” evoked in the removal of David Wojnarowicz's work from an American exhibition on sexual difference; in the defacement of a photograph by Andres Serrano – a veteran of the ‘Culture Wars’ of the 1980s – in France; and in the illegal detention of Ai Weiwei in China, among other examples. These events themselves suggest that global circulation of culture – including the metastatic growth of contemporary art – has made cultural work a realm of contention in the current political climate. What distinctions can culture workers make between what is taking place “on the ground”, in terms of political agitation, and



An Egyptian boy waves his national flag as anti-government protesters demonstrate in Tahrir Square, in Cairo, Egypt, on Feb. 8, 2011

on a symbolic level on today's geopolitical stage? Is it not the nature of global capital to regulate, repress or appropriate *both* levels as political commodities? These contradictory states are perhaps the result of artistic practices that attempt to sustain the seemingly paradoxical but productive impulse that is the legacy of the postwar leftist intellectual: uniting politics with the imagination.

The supposedly inimical relationship between the political and the aesthetic defined the critical debates around modern and postwar art. The tension between social revolution, or political progress, and imagination or formal invention underscored both the cultural politics of the avant-garde and the reactionary “vulgarized” conservatism of commodity culture. If formalism was the expression of bourgeois art, then the dogma of political concerns was deemed, in contradistinction, to undermine autonomy, and with it art's critical capacity or radical potential. While political agency was joined to formal autonomy, eliding the “political unconscious” of the aesthetic, the politicization of artistic forms, in contrast, risked being reduced to either kitsch or agitprop. In the wake of the collapse of the Eastern bloc, and the anti-regime uprisings of the so-called “Arab Spring,” it is apt to ask whether these oppositional distinctions remain central to the critical relevance of art in contemporary politics. In order to affirm their engagement as both political and aesthetic practices, do contemporary artistic forms need to formulate new relations between the political and the aesthetic – between autonomy, imagination, and political agency? Is contemporary art still caught between the options of “radicality” – in the belief that political resistance is linked to negation or a “shock” to normative complacency – on the one hand, and the dissolution into relativism, commodification or spectacle on the other?

The generative relationship between politics and aesthetics needs to be salvaged from the critical neglect of such oppositional rhetoric, while the political character of cultural practices needs to be expanded beyond the well-worn models of the postwar left or vague conceptions of politically-inflected discourse. The crowds of Tahrir Square are not the crowds of the Latin Quarter. The “social turn” has shifted terms from the politics of representation to the ethics of participation and the artist as social agent; yet it also entrains a politics that conflates social transformation with instrumentalized cultural effects. Along with an elaborated sense of what a committed social practice might be – grounded say, in an active politics of citizenship and social justice – this entails the ongoing affirmation of the role of culture in a politics of freedom and plurality. Distinctions between critical or non-critical art may perhaps be less relevant now than the question of what “creative imaginary” culture can mobilize today against the “capitalist imaginary” that operates both in the streets and the situation room. As Cornelius Castoriadis writes, such a road is not laid out for us, but only opened through such political awakening, a resurgence of the “will to freedom.”