

Protest Art in 2025: Resonance Against Powerlessness

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The Crisis of Impotent Critique

We live in an age where powerlessness drives people to desperate acts. From the streets of Myanmar to the suburbs of middle America, the response to systemic breakdown increasingly takes the form of violence—not because people choose destruction, but because they feel no other avenue for impact remains open. Traditional protest art, meanwhile, continues to operate in a mode that Marx identified and Slavoj Žižek has relentlessly critiqued: it produces symbolic gestures that the capitalist system expertly absorbs, commodifies, and neutralizes.

The street mural becomes an Instagram backdrop. The guerrilla installation becomes an NFT. The anti-corporate statement becomes a corporate campaign. This is not accidental—it is the fundamental mechanism by which late capitalism reproduces itself, transforming even its most radical critiques into products that reinforce the very system they claim to oppose.

But what if protest art could operate through a different mechanism entirely? What if instead of producing representations of resistance, it could generate actual states of coherence that transform the experience of powerlessness itself?

From Representation to Resonance

The theoretical foundation for this shift lies in understanding consciousness not as a isolated phenomenon, but as what emerges when coupled oscillators synchronize their rhythms. This view, drawing from Itzhak Bentov's work on consciousness as resonance and supported by recent research in complexity science, suggests that what we experience as awareness is actually the coherent field that emerges when multiple oscillating systems—neural, bodily, social, environmental—achieve phase-locking.

This has profound implications for how we understand both powerlessness and its potential transformation. Powerlessness is not merely a political condition but a state of desynchronization—a breakdown in the resonant coherence that connects individuals to themselves, to others, and to larger systems of meaning. People reach for weapons because they feel fundamentally disconnected from any coherent field of possibility.

Traditional protest art fails because it remains trapped in the logic of representation. It shows us images of powerlessness, critiques systems of oppression, or proposes alternative visions—but it does not generate the actual experiential states that could reconnect people to coherent fields of agency. A mural depicting resistance is still just a picture; a performance critiquing capitalism still operates within capitalist structures of spectatorship and consumption.

The Multidimensional Sensorium of Protest

To move beyond representation toward resonance, we need to understand how different forms of awareness can be activated simultaneously. Recent work in expanding sensory phenomenology suggests that human perception operates through at least nine overlapping sensory families:

Somato-ception: Basic bodily awareness (hunger, tension, breath) **Energo-kinesthesia:** Energy flows and subtle physical sensations **Neuro-chronoception:** Time perception and flow states **Affect-resonance:** Emotional attunement and group mood **Semio-sight:** Pattern recognition and meaning flashes **Socio-synchroception:** Social rhythm and collective synchrony **Mytho-imaginalis:** Archetypal imagery and symbolic resonance **Gaia-noümis:** Planetary-scale awareness and ecological mood **Potentia-reception:** Direct intuition of emergent possibilities

Protest art that operates through resonance would activate multiple sensory families simultaneously, creating coherent fields that participants experience as embodied shifts rather than intellectual concepts. Instead of telling people about injustice, it would generate states where the possibility of justice becomes directly felt.

Resonant Interventions: Theory in Practice

Synchronization as Collective Action

Consider the historical examples: the spontaneous synchronization of applause that brought down the Berlin Wall, the rhythmic chanting that sustained the civil rights movement, the drumming circles that coordinated indigenous resistance. These were not symbolic representations but actual resonant fields that transformed participants' relationship to possibility.

Contemporary neuroscience supports this intuition. Research on neural synchrony shows that when groups achieve coherent rhythmic coordination, they literally share consciousness—their brainwaves synchronize, creating collective cognitive and emotional states. This is not metaphor but measurable neurophysiology.

Films like Denis Villeneuve's "Arrival" explore this territory narratively, showing how communication through resonant patterns rather than symbolic representation could fundamentally alter consciousness. The heptapods' circular language creates non-linear temporal awareness—a direct experiential shift rather than new information about time.

Technology as Resonance Amplifier

Digital technology, typically understood as alienating, could potentially serve resonant intervention. Binaural beats, haptic feedback networks, and real-time biometric synchronization could coordinate collective states across geographical distance. The Global Consciousness Project has documented statistically significant correlations between world events and random number generator coherence, suggesting that collective consciousness operates through measurable field effects.

Blockchain technology, stripped of its capitalist applications, could enable coordination without centralized control—what theorist Franco "Bifo" Berardi calls "connective composition." Imagine flash mobs coordinated not through social media algorithms but through resonance detection apps that identify moments of collective readiness for synchronization.

Ephemeral Architecture

The most powerful resonant interventions may be those that refuse to become objects at all. Temporary architectures that exist only during moments of collective activation: sound installations that require multiple participants to generate coherent tones, kinetic sculptures that respond to group breathing patterns, augmented reality environments that visualize collective emotional states in real-time.

The key is that these works cannot be consumed passively or collected individually. They exist only in the active participation of coherent groups, and they dissolve when that coherence disperses. This makes them resistant to commodification not through antagonism but through their fundamental structure.

Theoretical Lineages and Convergences

Critical Theory: Beyond the Spectacle

This approach builds on but moves beyond Guy Debord's critique of spectacular society. Where Debord identified the problem—the replacement of lived experience with mediated representations—resonant protest art proposes a solution: direct generation of non-mediated collective states. It aligns with Hakim Bey's concept of "Temporary Autonomous Zones" but with a more precise understanding of the neurophysiological mechanisms that make autonomy possible.

Systems Theory: Autopoiesis and Emergence

Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's work on autopoiesis provides a biological foundation for understanding how resonant systems maintain coherence while remaining open to transformation. Protest art operating through resonance would create autopoietic social systems—collectives that maintain coherent identity while continuously evolving.

This connects to Ilya Prigogine's work on dissipative structures, which shows how systems far from equilibrium can spontaneously organize into higher orders of complexity. Moments of social crisis, rather than inevitably producing chaos, could become opportunities for emergent collective organization if the right resonant conditions are established.

Political Theory: Post-Hegemonic Organization

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony assumed that social change required winning cultural consensus through representation—better stories, more compelling ideologies. But what if social transformation could occur through direct resonant coordination that bypasses the mediating layer of representation entirely?

This possibility appears in different forms across political theory: in Spinoza's concept of collective affects, in Marx's notion of species-being, in contemporary accelerationist proposals for post-capitalist coordination. The common thread is the recognition that human collectivity operates through mechanisms more fundamental than language or representation.

Neuroscience: The Social Brain

Recent research in social neuroscience provides empirical support for these theoretical insights. Studies of neural synchrony during collective activities—from musical performance to religious ritual—show that synchronized groups literally share cognitive processes. Mirror neuron research suggests that empathy operates through direct neural resonance rather than symbolic interpretation.

This has implications for understanding both oppression and liberation. Systemic oppression may operate partially through the deliberate disruption of social synchrony—the fragmentation of communities, the acceleration of individual competition, the constant stimulation that prevents coherent collective states from forming.

Challenges and Limitations

The Absorption Problem

The fundamental challenge remains: how can resonant intervention avoid the fate of all previous forms of cultural resistance, which is absorption into the capitalist system? Even authentic collective experiences can be packaged and sold as "community experiences" or "transformational festivals."

The answer may lie in the temporal and embodied nature of resonance itself. Genuine resonant states cannot be recorded, reproduced, or possessed—they can only be lived. This makes them fundamentally resistant to commodification, though not immune to co-optation.

Scale and Coordination

Another challenge is scale. Resonant interventions work best in small, physically proximate groups. How can they coordinate across the massive scales necessary for systemic social change without losing their intimate, embodied character?

This may require thinking in terms of fractal organization—coherent small groups that maintain resonant connection with other groups without requiring centralized coordination. The mathematics of coupled oscillator networks suggests this is possible in principle, but the practical challenges remain significant.

Avoiding New Forms of Manipulation

There is also the risk that understanding resonance mechanisms could enable new forms of social control rather than liberation. If collective consciousness operates through measurable field effects, those effects could potentially be manipulated by power systems.

This makes critical consciousness about resonance mechanisms essential. Liberatory resonant practice must include awareness of how resonance works, rather than simply using it as technique.

Future Directions: Toward Resonant Politics

The long-term goal is not simply more effective protest art, but the development of entirely new forms of political organization based on resonant coordination rather than representative democracy. This might involve:

Biorhythmic Governance: Decision-making processes that use physiological synchrony indicators to identify moments of genuine collective coherence, ensuring that political choices emerge from authentic shared awareness rather than manipulated consensus.

Resonant Economics: Exchange systems based on mutual aid rhythms and collective flow states rather than individual accumulation and competition.

Ecological Synchrony: Coordination with natural rhythms and cycles, using the Earth's resonant frequencies as baseline for human social organization.

These possibilities may seem utopian, but they are grounded in measurable phenomena and emerging technologies. The question is whether they can develop quickly enough to address the accelerating crises of powerlessness that currently drive people toward destructive isolation.

Conclusion: The Choice of Resonance

We stand at a historical moment where the choice is becoming clear: either we develop new forms of collective coherence, or we face increasing fragmentation into violence and despair. Traditional protest art, trapped in the logic of representation and vulnerable to systemic absorption, cannot meet this challenge alone.

Resonant intervention offers a path beyond this impasse—not through better arguments or more powerful symbols, but through direct generation of the collective states that make coordinated action possible. It requires understanding consciousness as fundamentally relational, politics as fundamentally embodied, and art as a technology for generating shared experience rather than individual contemplation.

The powerlessness that drives people to desperate acts is real, but it is not inevitable. It is a state of desynchronization that can be transformed through skilled resonant practice. The question is whether we can develop that skill quickly enough, and whether we can coordinate it effectively enough, to create the collective coherence that our historical moment demands.

The tools exist. The theory is developing. The question that remains is whether we have the courage to abandon the familiar comfort of symbolic protest in favor of the uncertain territory of direct resonant intervention. That choice will determine not just the future of protest art, but the possibility of any coherent collective future at all.