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# The Power of Museum Contexts to Shape Change: The Relationship Between Activist Art and Museum Missions

By: Bridget Girnus

**Abstract:** The 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have seen an increase in activist art practice. Activist art is not only created in defiance of social and political norms and policies, but also demands positive institutional changes through increased awareness brought about by artistic forms. In the current post-occupy condition, activist art has proliferated in the streets, but also in the museum sphere as well. Historical and contemporary activist art has increasingly been collected and displayed by museums for both their aesthetic and idealistic qualities. This raises questions in both activist and museum communities of whether activist art belongs in a museum, and if its message is diametrically changed in this new context. This essay considers these questions through three case studies of activist art exhibited in American art museums in the past twenty years: *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere* at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (2004), *Agitprop!* at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (2015), and *An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney's Collection, 1940–2017* at the Whitney Museum of American Art (2017). These three case studies reveal how new interpretations, juxtapositions, and relationships of and between activist art objects lead to new ways of analyzing the museum's role as a public institution. Each exhibition encourages innovation in the museum sphere; whether through placing artists as curators, commissioning community specific activist works, or internally critiquing the museum. Through these examples it becomes clear that exhibitions of activist art can be a vital resource for museums to utilize new strategies to fulfill their missions in socially engaged ways. **Keywords:** *activist art, museum activism, community activism, History of Protest, AgitPop!, The Interventionists*

## Introduction

Activist art and museums have had a complex relationship since the late nineteenth century. Some see this history in an oppositional light, stating that if an artist seeks to create real social change they must “work in ways that break with the dominant paradigms and established institutions of modern art,” including the museum.<sup>i</sup> Utilizing art to promote social change, activist artists criticized and protested against what has been called the “art system.”<sup>ii</sup> This system encapsulates all elements involved in making, viewing, judging, buying, and selling artwork. As museums are one element of this art system, they provide a target for some activists to oppose through their work. Starting in the 1960’s with groups like the Art Worker’s Coalition, artists targeted and protested the museum’s actions, mission, and structure.<sup>iii</sup> This practice continues today with one example being the art collective Liberate Tate, who staged performances to criticize Tate Modern and Tate Britain’s connection with BP Oil.<sup>iv</sup> These examples illustrate that sometimes museums and activist artists cannot always find common ground without politicizing this combination.

Yet, in contrast to this opposition, some museums have begun collecting and exhibiting activist art. This trend raises many questions on behalf of both artists and museum professionals, with some opponents on both sides claiming that activist art does not belong in a museum context. The analysis of three case studies of activist art exhibitions in American museums over the past twenty years reveals that museums and activists can successfully collaborate and transcend their potentially fraught relationships. These three exhibitions, *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere* at MASS MoCA, *Agitprop!* at the Brooklyn Museum, and *An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney’s Collection, 1940-2017* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, reveal how activist art can be utilized to challenge the

institution to engage with its mission through innovative curatorial practices, perhaps ultimately leading to a more publicly engaged and cognizant museum, that engages with its audience in socially conscious ways.

### **Background of Activist Art and the Museum**

Activist art spans geographic and temporal boundaries; however, a brief introduction to the history of activist practice reveals that activist art shares similar goals, namely to confront and reject the status quo, while also seeking to change it for the better by rectifying unjust practices. The first stirrings of activist art practice in the west coincided with societal changes in the nineteenth century such as an increase of secularization, capitalism, and urbanization, which increased opportunities for artists to participate more meaningfully in political engagements.<sup>v</sup> French artist Gustave Courbet and English artist William Morris are frequently cited as the first political artists because of their “divergent views on the nature of art and the role of the artist.”<sup>vi</sup> Their practice inspired others such as Walter Gropius, who founded the Bauhaus where “artists could contribute to the creation of a new society.”<sup>vii</sup> The events of the Second World War suspended activist practice in Europe; however, a greater focus on activist movements in the United States began in the 1950s with groups such as the Artists and Writers Protest and the Art Worker’s Coalition who used art to protest topics such as the Vietnam War and racial discrimination.<sup>viii</sup> These early collectives were the backbone of later groups of the 1980s and 1990s such as the Guerilla Girls and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. At the start of the new millennium, activist artists began to alter their practices through taking “creative direct action” in the public sphere, instead of engaging solely with an institution.<sup>ix</sup> Occurrences such as the Battle of Seattle in 1999 and the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement of 2014 illustrate this shift as artists engaged in these active public movements which were based on larger socio-economic

issues that impacted more than just the art world. In these instances, public spaces of occupation and protest could become places for imaginative visions where “a new world is “prefigured” in the action itself.”<sup>x</sup> This move to being outside the institution led to broader ideas that transcended the more localized aims of earlier activist artists, changing the role of the artist to one of organizer.<sup>xi</sup> Contemporary artists around the world continue to be inspired by historical practices to guide their work and the case study exhibitions explore these connections.

The idea of the artist as separate from the institution continues today with some museum professionals and artists arguing against the inclusion of activist artwork in institutions. Some individuals in the museum field may use the idea of museum neutrality to argue that the inclusion of activist art makes the museum space too political. However, more recently, it has been maintained by some in the field that the idea of neutrality resists attempts of inclusion because it is subject to individual interpretation and that the rejection of certain objects because of their subject matter can isolate communities who may resonate with activist messages.<sup>xii</sup> Additionally, activist art can be made from unconventional mediums that may be considered ephemeral, such as song and dances.<sup>xiii</sup> Cataloguing and caring for this wide variety of practices may pose challenges for collection management and conservation staff. Although the inclusion of activist art in the museum space may present ideological and physical challenges, museums can use their missions as guides to consider how to best align their institutional values with the work of activist artists. In this way, museums can be discerning and pragmatic in their presentation of activist art while also supporting activist’s aims in an informed way.

On the other hand, some activist artists also argue against the inclusion of activist art in museums. In some cases, activist art may critique the art institution itself or the politics of those who support it. Additionally, some artworks and performances may be created for specific

contexts, like protests, imbuing the works with an aura or emotional resonance that directly relates to its moment of creation. Therefore, some artists may feel that these works may lose their situational relevance by being placed in a more static museum context.<sup>xiv</sup> Although some may see the contextual setting as paramount to a work's power of critique, in some cases activist art may take on new meanings in a museum setting, especially through combinations and conversations with other artworks on display. In this way, artwork that is critical of the art institution may not necessarily lose its power in a museum setting but continue to challenge it in new ways.<sup>xv</sup> These questions must ultimately be answered by the individual artist. However, museums can support the creation of these new connections and the maintenance of an object's aura through their curatorial processes.

Despite the potential challenges with including activist art in museums, institutions around the world increasingly continue to collect and display protest art. Some individuals believe that contemporary art is experiencing a "social turn," and therefore art institutions embrace activist art that reflects socially engaged content.<sup>xvi</sup> Author Brian Holmes argued that museum curators aim to remain in touch with contemporary society and display art that represents political reality and activism to connect with their audience, while gaining funds through exhibition and gift store sales. Another explanation comes from Mary Elizabeth Williams, who discussed how the inclusion of protest art in collections is a crucial way to capture cultural identities and values during historically significant moments in time in order to "ground societies in their own histories and create communities of individuals who understand that they have shared experiences."<sup>xvii</sup>

Ultimately, activist art can function as an important tool for museums to utilize to fulfill their missions, while remaining relevant with their communities. The three exhibitions

discussed, at MASS MoCA, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and the Whitney, reveal how including activist art in the museum activates the space in new ways, whether through institutional critique, using artists as curators, or incorporating historical space outside of the museum. All three of the exhibitions expose the positive effects of displaying activist art in a museum context and how mission and art can work collaboratively to not only promote the museum, but also activist practice.

### ***The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere at MASS MoCA***

The first, and earliest, exhibition was *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*, which was curated by Nato Thompson and exhibited at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) from May 29, 2004 to March 20, 2005. The idea guiding the exhibition was the practice of interventionists, a term that Thompson chose to quantify the work of artists beginning in the late 1980s through the 1990s. This interventionist work took place outside of museums, galleries, and studios and sought to represent politics as well by placing “their work into the heart of the political situation itself.”<sup>xviii</sup> These artists did not only rely on the techniques of artistic practice, but also a set of “tactics,” which functioned as tools in light of the artist’s visual, spatial, and cultural experiences.<sup>xix</sup> The exhibition presented works from 29 international artists and collectives, organized in four curatorial sections: Nomads, Reclaim the Streets, Ready to Wear, and the Experimental University.<sup>xx</sup> Many of the artist’s aims revolved around not simply creating aesthetically political work, but also art that “presents” or adds a physical or practical solution to a preconceived problem.<sup>xxi</sup> This disparate combination of objects and ideas that exist in a space outside of the art world offer aspects of “humor, sleight of hand, and high design” in order to relate to audiences in a more congenial and convincing way, than perhaps more traditional or overtly political works might.<sup>xxii</sup> In totality, Thompson viewed the

artists as teachers, providing public education and tactile tools in order to provide “opportunity to the viewers” to confront social issues that concerned them.<sup>xxiii</sup> This idea that activist artworks have the tangible power to create opportunities for change can be seen in all three exhibitions, especially as each exhibition provided the museums with proactive ways to put their missions into practice.

Critiques of the exhibition reflect some of the general concerns about exhibiting activist art. T.J. Demos, an *Artforum* critic, wondered if the works were too objectified by being in the museum, becoming decontextualized, untouchable, and static.<sup>xxiv</sup> Thompson sought to address this challenge by commissioning artists and collectives to create works for the exhibition that directly engaged with the museum’s community of North Adams, Massachusetts. In total, he commissioned eight new works, but perhaps the most compelling and immersed within the community of North Adams was the collective e-Xplo’s who created bus tours for the exhibition. E-Xplo is a collective founded in 1999 that gives “sonic explorations of cities” through bus tours. For the exhibition, e-Xplo provided bus tours of both the community of North Adams and the neighboring town of Williamstown, Massachusetts, in order to illuminate the socio-economic and geographic discrepancies between the towns. Participants listened to a recorded tour while on the bus, which included music and noises that related to the bus’s location on the route. The e-Xplo tours did not seek to provide an explicit message but instead left the responsibility to the viewer to choose what to look at, what to listen to, and when to feel emotion in order to “hopefully produce a more attentive, active, and critical subject.”<sup>xxv</sup> Through this commission, Thompson intimately connected and artwork to the town of North Adams, raising visitors’ awareness to local issues and histories.



This collaboration reveals how activist exhibitions can transcend the museum space through creative collaboration between artists and curators. Thompson was clearly aware of the museum's history as a site of labor, industry, and production and how this related deeply to the historical and lived experiences of the residents of North Adams. Instead of attempting to denigrate the history of the city or museum, Thompson celebrated and encouraged viewers to think more deeply and engage with this integral fabric of the museum. These curatorial decisions are also illuminated when considering the mission of MASS MoCA, which is:

Through innovative collaborations, MASS MoCA helps artists and their supporters create and show important new work, bringing to our visitor's bold visual and performing art in all stages of production, while also creating a stimulating center of creativity and commerce that brings life and economic vibrancy to its hometown.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Imbedded in their mission is the commitment to artistic collaborations and support of the community of North Adams. Nato Thompson's work with *The Interventionists* revealed how the display of activist art both in the museum and in larger community contexts promoted stronger and more deeply felt messages of activism while also connecting with the community in new and socially engaged ways.

### ***Agitprop!* at the Brooklyn Art Museum**

The next exhibition, *Agitprop!* was curated by the staff of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum and ran from December 11, 2015 through August 7, 2016. Its unique title was based off of the combination of agitation and propaganda, a word coined during the Russian Revolution of 1917. Like *The Interventionists*, *Agitprop!* focused on displaying tactical and pedestrian art objects that function outside of the museum. The exhibition sought to contextualize current activist practices through the display of art relating to historical revolts and protests. The exhibition was grounded by five historical case studies, each focusing

on a different historical activist theme, such as: Soviet women and propaganda, the work of Tina Modotti, women's suffrage in the United States, the NAACP's Anti-Lynching Campaign, and the Federal Theatre Project. Through these five sections, *Agitprop!* covered several key activist issues of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that spanned geographic borders. Yet, its focus leaned more heavily on feminist issues in light of its curation by staff from the Sackler Center. However, it can be argued that these themes reached beyond temporal and gender boundaries, connecting the history of social protest to a current social context.

This connection between the past and the present was bridged by the curators through the inclusion of twenty handpicked artists whose projects addressed struggles for social justice in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The curators hoped that the work from the five historical exhibition case studies would provide a deeper context for these contemporary works, "highlighting the intergenerational strategies, ongoing developments, and long-term impact of creative practices on social conditions around the world over the past century."<sup>xxvii</sup> However, what made the exhibition unique was its ongoing waves of participation, which occurred over the run of the exhibition. The original twenty contemporary artists in turn nominated twenty more artists or collectives, and then these second participants nominated a wave of third artists. Therefore, the exhibition was only complete during its final months.

This curatorial strategy prompted dissatisfaction from critics and the press. Many decried the large sections of blank walls in the exhibition that awaited future artwork, leading them to question if the museum expected visitors to make multiple visits and if each wave of the exhibition would be unique.<sup>xxviii</sup> The other critique that arose questioned if the historical-contemporary connection would remain clear with so many works being added to the exhibition. However, curators ensured that connections between works were made strategically, so that

viewers could compare and contrast art from different eras together. For example, photographs of Dread Scott's 2014 performance piece *On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide* was placed next to works in the NAACP section. One positive outcome that emerged from the wide scope of global artists was increased recognition for lesser known artists selected through the democratic nomination process, such as the Sahmat Collective from India.<sup>xxix</sup> Nevertheless, others found fault with placing international works in the context of an exhibition that grounded most of its historical relevancy in social issues that took place in the United States.<sup>xxx</sup> However, it can be argued that these historical cases are meant to function as only a starting point for the artists. As the exhibition grew, the works on display became almost unrecognizable compared against the historical past they came from, perhaps revealing the flexibility of activist work.

*Agitprop's!* conception related strongly to the Brooklyn Museum's mission, vision, and goals. Their concise mission aimed "to create inspiring encounters with art that expand the ways we see ourselves, the world and its possibilities." When this mission was combined with the museum's visions and values, it created a fleshed out image of a museum that is concerned about creating a socially just and emphatic community.<sup>xxxi</sup> Through these values, the museum hoped to "seek out and promote perspectives that expand the stories we tell," "accept the controversies that may accompany courageous conversations," and "believe that in action there is hope by championing the powerful roles art and artists can play in our communities."<sup>xxxii</sup> *Agitprop!'s* inception and curatorial goals appear to be a direct result of these values.

However, the exhibition of *Agitprop!* did not only fulfill these categories, it also challenged the museum's commitment to them, especially in the light of an ongoing protest during the exhibition. In 2016, the museum hosted the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Brooklyn Real Estate Summit,

which many found insulting due to the surrounding debate around gentrification in Brooklyn neighborhoods. Some artists and activists viewed the summit as harmful to the community and protested the museum's support of it. However, instead of dismissing the protestors claims, the museum included space for some of their works addressing real estate and gentrification to be added to the exhibition.<sup>xxxiii</sup> *A People's Monument to Anti-Displacement* was displayed in *Agitprop!*, and the museum agreed to host another event titled The Brooklyn Community Forum on Anti-Gentrification and Displacement where artists could share their views on the situation through panels that addressed how cultural institutions might assist displaced communities.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Situations like this embody both the mission of *Agitprop!* and the Brooklyn Museum, instigating positive change in communities. This challenge also revealed how the timing of the exhibition supported the museum in realizing its mission in new ways, not merely passively showing activist art, but physically changing the exhibition when they met dissatisfaction. Director Anne Pasternak recalled how merely speaking with the artists convinced her to include their voices in the exhibition.<sup>xxxv</sup> This emphasis on communication exemplifies how these exhibitions can promote change or at least challenge the ideals and actions of the museum. Therefore, even if displayed statically, activist objects can take on new roles as conversation starters, stimulating change through thoughtful viewing and discussion.

***An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney's Collection, 1940–2017 at the Whitney Museum of American Art***

The final case study is *An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney's Collection, 1940–2017*, which was shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art from August 18, 2017 to August 27, 2018. The curators of the exhibition stated that their ultimate goal was to promote “the belief that artists play a profound role in transforming their time and shaping the

future.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> The curators limited the exhibition by only using works from the museum’s collection and those made between 1940 and 2017. Through their exhibition title, the curators stated that protest art is not quantifiable and emerges in society in a variety of forms, media, and spaces, whether physical or digital. The idea of protest being incomplete suggests that activist art is still an important part of artistic practice and greater socio-political trends.

Curator David Breslin discussed how he wanted each gallery to have a precise thesis in order to show how protest can occur in a multitude of ways.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Therefore, he divided the exhibition into galleries that focused on larger socio-historical topics, such as racism in the 1940’s and 1950’s, the Vietnam War, Women’s Rights, and the AIDS crisis. However, the curators also included two self-reflective exhibition subsections that focused specifically on actions of the Whitney. “Strike, Boycott, Advocate: The Whitney Archives” discussed works from 1960-1971 which were made by artists protesting the Whitney’s selective curatorial decisions, lack of diversity, and limits of accessibility to the museum. Another section, “Abuse of Power,” related specifically to the Whitney’s 1993 Biennial and the exhibition *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (1994) and displayed artworks the museum acquired through these exhibitions that comment on the systemic racial violence in America. The exhibition closed with “The Usable Past,” which included works made after 2000 demonstrating both “how memory can inform models of protest and activism,” while “nostalgia can make it difficult to move forward.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> This last gallery framed both the current practice of artists looking to the past for inspiration and possibilities, as well as the exhibition’s retroactive lens.

Although the exhibition limited itself to the collection of the Whitney, it still managed to cover a large range of topics. However, what makes it unique is its explicit focus on its own

institutional decisions, illustrated through the “Abuse of Power” and “Strike, Boycott, Advocate: The Whitney Archives” sections. When viewed together, these two galleries foiled each other, the first presented the shortcomings of the museum, while the second revealed the progressivism it reached in the nineties. Although these two sections are contrasted with the rest of the exhibition, which does not acknowledge the context of the Whitney, the exhibition was viewed positively by critics. Many commented on connections between the exhibition’s themes and the current protests and conflicts surrounding politics in 2017, calling it an impressive feat for a conservative museum to “recognize a sense of urgency in the present moment and offer a space for reflection on the past.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Yet, some critiqued the fact that many of the works that critique the Whitney itself were acquired in recent years, even though they were created almost fifty years before.<sup>xl</sup> However, it appears that this past lack of curatorial acknowledgment may have been in the forefront of Breslin’s mind as he stated that the museum is trying “to work closely with artists, to see how we can be in step with each other.”<sup>xli</sup>

How does the mission of the Whitney relate to its exhibition of activist art? In its mission the Whitney states that it “seeks to be the defining museum of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century art of the United States.”<sup>xlii</sup> The museum also states a didactic mission, hoping to “educate a diverse public through direct interaction with artists,”<sup>xliii</sup> Although the exhibition mainly focused on more historic works of activist art, this aim can be reflected through Breslin’s previous comment of working directly with artists. In addition, the exhibition aimed to tie the Whitney together with the history of protest art and artists. This was evident in the introduction of the exhibition that stated “since its founding in the early twentieth century, the Whitney has served as a forum for the most urgent art and ideas of the day, at times attracting protest itself.”<sup>xliv</sup> The institutional critique by the institution of the Whitney is an innovative way to fulfill its mission to be a

“defining museum,” defining not only the art of the period, but the role of the museum in promoting or obstructing it. Artist Andrea Fraser stated that the most important issue around institutional critique is specifying “what kind of values we [the art system] institutionalize, what forms of practice we reward, and what kind of rewards we aspire to.”<sup>xlv</sup> It is clear the Whitney was seeking to answer these questions and acknowledge its role as both a perpetrator and an advocate through *An Incomplete History of Protest*.

### **Conclusion**

In his critique of contemporary art museums, scholar Robert Janes cited important questions to consider when seeking to revitalize the museum, such as “if you want people to believe in the capacity of your organization to deliver on its mission, where is the proof of your distinctness?”<sup>xlvi</sup> Through these three case studies, it is clear how activist art can augment a museum’s mission while also making the museum distinct in its support of activist aims and the concerns of its community. By incorporating narratives of struggle, power, and protest, each exhibition sought to engage their communities and respond to issues that were close to home, whether that was a lack of local representation, a call for increased transparency, or a righting of historic discrimination. This relates to the opinion of some that the museum should be a place for both public thinking and acting, shaped both by curators but also through visitors and the larger public.<sup>xlvii</sup> By forging connections with their communities through activist art, museums can encourage societal change both within and outside their walls. Museums can use activist art to immerse themselves in local issues and ideas, providing them a way to expand their missions. Steve Lyons stated, “museums are not and will never be the privileged sites of political action.”<sup>xlviii</sup> However, by using exhibitions of activist art to amplify and further their missions,

museums can become allies to those in the community who are fighting for social justice and change.



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## End Notes

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- <sup>ix</sup> McKee 2016, 16.
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