Artistic Activism and Museum Accountability: Staging Antagonism in the Cultural Sphere

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Abstract
This article examines the diversity of tactical interventions that transpired at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2019, culminating in the resignation of the vice-chairman of its Board of Trustees. Instead of accepting the myth of museum neutrality, the activist campaign, spearheaded by the action-oriented movement Decolonize This Place, treated the Whitney as a site of ideological struggle, permeated by inner divisions and conflicting interests. Through their organizing efforts, activists prefigured a movement-based form of cultural production, mapped connections between seemingly disparate struggles, and built decolonial solidarities. While the activists’ actions were essential to stage the antagonisms that had been dormant in the institution, a multiplicity of actors needed to step in during the process, creating multiple pressure points and taking sides in the division. To amplify the Whitney staffers’ attempt to hold the museum leadership accountable, they sought to bring political protest into the institution, challenging the very principle of counting who belongs to the community and who is excluded.

Keywords
decolonization, institutional governance, museum neutrality, political protest, prefigurative politics, social movements, Whitney Museum

Artistic Activism against Museum Neutrality
Black liberation matters. Queer liberation matters. Trans liberation matters. Palestine’s liberation matters [. . .] We are here to talk about accountability. To get Warren Kanders off the board. We are here to talk about solidarity amongst each other because our struggles are intertwined, our liberations are intertwined. (activist statement, Whitney Museum, 17 May 2019)

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The notion of artistic activism has been explored extensively, albeit through different lenses, by both political theorists and art historians over the last decade. The renewed interest in artistic activism can be justified by the recent wave of boycotts, sit-down protests, strikes, and direct actions targeting museums in a global context. The growing movement of strategic interventions in museums can be attested from groups like Not An Alternative and Liberate Tate that share a commitment to liberate museums from the fossil fuel industry, through groups like Occupy Museums and Art Space Sanctuary that reimagine cultural institutions as part of the commons and as safe spaces that guarantee everyone access to education and culture, respectively, to campaigns like P.A.I.N. and Strike MoMA that foreground issues of toxic philanthropy and the ethics of museum sponsorship. Such initiatives have set out to hold museums, cultural institutions, and non-profit organizations accountable not only to their own mission statements, but also to the communities they claim to serve.

These agitational and creative practices have been praised for bringing political protest into museums, serving as a tool to disrupt the smooth operation of elite institutions and a means to address the inequalities that permeate the cultural realm (see Serafini, 2018; Sholette, 2017; Thompson, 2015; Weibel, 2015). Scholarship on artistic activism tends to focus on three main aspects, namely its temporary mise-en-scènes that makes it less vulnerable to cultural commodification, its disruptive appropriation of public space, and its participatory, embodied, and performative nature that prefigures alternative subjectivities and social interactions. Indeed, for Butler (2015: 59), political protest involves insurgent forms of collectivity and a performative process of self-determination that is ‘enacted by the assembly of bodies, plural, persisting, acting, and laying claim to a public sphere by which one has been abandoned’. In this sense, this contemporary form of aesthetico-political protest can be related to what Rancière (2010: 35) defines as the moment of political subjectivization during which those who are normally excluded from the public sphere – ‘the part of those without part’ – disrupt the ‘unity of the given’ and perform their very right to be recognized as legitimate partners in the debate.

For Decolonize This Place member Yates McKee (2016: 6, original emphasis), such a movement-based cultural production ‘involves the reinvention of art as direct action, collective affect, and political subjectivization embedded in radical movements working to reconstruct the commons in the face of both localized injustices and systemic crisis that characterize the contemporary capitalist order’. Similarly, for Graeber (2002), less alienated forms of creativity, such as the language of civil disobedience or the networks of creative direct actions during the alter-globalization movement, can prefigure an alternative, non-capitalist imaginary. This seems to also resonate with Marchart’s ‘conflictual aesthetics’, namely, an aesthetic that has the ability to ‘pre-enact’ and anticipate the moment of antagonism that is yet to come. In fact, the staging of antagonism does not have a proper place, it cannot be predefined or predetermined, it arises inadvertently and can only be encountered. According to Marchart (2019: 55, original emphasis), ‘the political as such cannot be staged [. . .] it nevertheless must be staged in order to become visible at all’. Forms of artistic activism encapsulate attempts of staging the political to foreground its inherent dissensual and antagonistic forces. Indeed, what the recent resurgence of more agitating and organizing practices has illustrated is that artists
and activists accept the inevitability of ‘getting your hands dirty’ and dive into the murky waters of political struggle and social change.

In this respect, this article differentiates itself from the existing literature in three ways. Firstly, it investigates a remarkable but hitherto under-examined case of artistic activism as it unfolded at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2019. It documents the deployment of a series of interventions, ranging from unannounced occupations to more subtle means of propagation, aiming to hold the Whitney Museum accountable and culminating in Warren Kanders’s resignation from his position as vice-chairman of the museum’s Board of Trustees. The actions discussed were spearheaded by the action-oriented movement Decolonize This Place, which is facilitated by the MTL+ collective, and whose work revolves around Indigenous struggle, black liberation, Free Palestine, labour rights, and de-gentrification. The findings presented are part of a wider research project on various modes of democratizing cultural institutions and result from extensive fieldwork carried out in New York, where I conducted semi-structured interviews with activist members and engaged in participant observation during the organization and deployment of activists’ tactics. By adopting an ‘ethnographic sensibility’, I attempt to develop a more nuanced theoretical understanding of the practices under study and a more finely grained empirical analysis of their actors’ interactions, motivations, and theoretical presuppositions (see Herzog and Zacka, 2019).

Secondly, I explore artistic activism in juxtaposition with the notion of ‘museum neutrality’. Indeed, the numerous activist initiatives that have set out to scrutinize museums’ ethics, streams of funding, and principles of governance are often confronted with the museums’ adherence to an ‘authoritative neutrality’ (Janes, 2009: 59). As custodians of knowledge and cultural heritage, museums claim to present their information impartially and from a neutral ideological position, while priding themselves on offering spaces for unbiased debate. According to Janes and Sandell (2019: 8), this has allowed many museum boards and staff to affirm that ‘they must protect their neutrality, lest they fall prey to bias, trendiness, and special interest groups’. Although museums have been generally perceived as institutional apparatuses that construct an ‘order of things’ according to ‘universal’ and ‘objective’ principles, it has also been argued that the ideology of neutrality obfuscates their Euro-American – and colonial – foundation, along with its raced, gendered, and classed biases (see Bennett, 1995; Raicovich, 2021). In other words, since museums are part of society, they are ‘undeniably implicated in the dynamics of (in)equality and the power relations between different groups through their role in constructing and disseminating dominant social narratives’ (Sandell, 2002: 8).1

Particularly during the past decade, the notion of museum neutrality has become the epicentre of controversy due to museums’ increasing reliance on corporate and private funding. Indeed, the case becomes even more complicated when the ethical underpinning of institutional sponsorship is compromised, namely when the trustees’ means of creating personal wealth contradicts the purported values of the institutions they are sponsoring. Wealthy individuals and corporations strive to associate themselves with cultural institutions via their sponsorship, since these institutions not only guarantee access to political influence and public relations, but also secure them symbolic standing, brand promotion, and a ‘social licence to operate’ (Evans, 2015: 88). Arts sponsorship can allow donors to present themselves as philanthropists while providing cover for
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profiteers of war, state violence, mass incarceration, and climate catastrophe (also termed ‘artwashing’). Scholars now argue that ‘philanthropy has always been toxic’, highlighting the undemocratic nature of philanthrocapitalism that undermines essential public sector services and consolidates political quietism (Joselit, 2019: 3, see also Fraser, 2018). Such a model of museum governance alludes to what has been characterized as a ‘post-democratic order’, a condition where antagonism and disagreement – the very core of politics – have been colonized by a corporate and privileged oligarchy, and where community is perceived as essence. In this sense, by reconsidering the fundamental role of museums within their larger social context, one is compelled to ask whom these institutions are for and to whom they should be accountable. Building on the growing number of critics who have recently set out to debunk the ‘myth of neutrality’, I argue that museums can be held accountable both to their purported missions and to their publics, while being transformed into terrains of conflict and ‘battleground[s] where different hegemonic projects are confronted’ (Mouffe, 2007).

Thirdly, instead of perceiving institutions as monolithic entities, this article demonstrates that they comprise a multiplicity of competing interests (between staff, leadership, artists, and publics) and are permeated by inner divisions, rendering them ideal sites for political protest and the staging of broader societal antagonisms. Indeed, targeting the Whitney Museum served as a means not only to apply pressure related to a specific demand, but also to leverage its high visibility, symbolic capital, and cultural legitimacy in the service of grassroots organizing, movement building, and decolonial freedom. While the activists’ disruptive tactics were essential to test out the ‘antagonistic quality’ of the Whitney crisis, I contend that a multiplicity of agents, both from inside and outside the museum, were needed to step in along the process, creating multiple pressure points, forging critical alliances between the ‘unaccounted’, and taking sides in the division. In this respect, I show that the Whitney controversy not only brought to the fore questions of institutional governance, ethics, and accountability, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, provided a testament to the changing landscape of contemporary political action (not limited to artistic activism) by accentuating how multiple demands, actors, and sites of struggle can coincide and complement one another without collapsing into homogeneous categories.

Setting the Stage: ‘The Democracy of Art’

Walking through the door of Cooper Union’s Amphitheatre on 26 January 2019, one would have witnessed a full house of more than 200 artists, activists, and cultural workers who had gathered in a Town Hall Assembly hosted by Decolonize This Place in collaboration with Chinatown Art Brigade and W.A.G.E. to address ‘The Crisis of the Whitney’. The J26 Town Hall Assembly, as it came to be known, took place just weeks after the courageous decision of more than 100 Whitney staffers to address a letter to the museum leadership concerning its connection to the migrant crisis at the US-Mexico border. This was a response to the revelations, published by Hyperallergic art magazine, that the tear gas canisters discharged by US Border Patrol agents against hundreds of asylum seekers crossing the border between Tijuana and San Diego had been manufactured by Safariland and Defense Technology. Both corporations, selling tear gas, rubber
bullets, impact munitions, and police training services – boasting that they offer ‘less lethal solutions’ for crowd control – were owned by Warren B. Kanders, who served as vice-chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Whitney Museum. The symbolic weight of the staff’s letter – intended as an internal document but leaked to the press – was tangible since it stood in sharp contrast to the Whitney’s claims about being an equitable and inclusive institution that serves diverse communities. Highlighting the contradictions between the museum’s progressive façade and its actual practices, the letter argued: ‘We cannot claim to serve these communities while accepting funding from individuals whose actions are at odds with [the museum’s] mission’. The staff’s demands included the consideration of Kanders’s resignation, the development of clear ethical guidelines for trustee participation, and a museum-wide forum to address staff concerns and other policies.

The Whitney staff’s initiative was met by the leadership’s condescending remarks. Kanders contended that ‘the politicization of every aspect of public life, including commercial organizations and cultural institutions, is not productive or healthy’ (Greenberger, 2018). For his part, Whitney Museum Director Adam Weinberg, in a statement that invoked all the Rancièrian buzzwords, took pride in fashioning a museum where unheard voices are recognized – thus encapsulating ‘the democracy of art’ – asserting that ‘we respect the right to dissent’, but the ‘staff does not appoint or remove board members’ (Weber, 2018). Both Kanders and Weinberg’s responses echoed, in many ways, what has been described by Rancière (2010: 36) as the ‘police order’, which pertains to a particular aesthetico-political regime where every part of the society has been accounted for, and community is ‘made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places’. The Whitney staff’s exercise of their democratic right to dissent and to have their voice recognized was negated by a simple statement – ‘this is not your place’ – hence disqualifying the political quality of their roles and positions. This attempt to ‘depoliticize political matters, reserve them for places that are non-places, places that do not leave any space for the democratic invention of the polemic’ illustrated the lack of accountability of the museum leadership to its staff and to the publics it supposedly serves (Rancière, 2006: 82).

It was this profound contradiction between the museum’s pronounced commitment to liberal values, such as tolerance and freedom of expression, and the outright dismissal of the staffers’ right to be heard that led activists to organize the J26 Town Hall Assembly. The assembly’s format was premised on community agreements, horizontal conversations, and direct participatory processes. Echoing the prefigurative politics of the alter-globalization movement and Occupy Wall Street, the insistence on inclusive practices of governing and the sensitivity in all aspects of the organizing processes were a focal point for Decolonize This Place. Indeed, the group’s formations, analysis, and principles are informed by a self-reflexive ethos and a continuous effort to centre whiteness, while not reproducing structures of oppression or narratives of victimization unwittingly. By Decolonize This Place’s own admission, the J26 Town Hall Assembly was not only ‘an opportunity to reclaim, reimagine, and radically transform our cultural institutions’, but also ‘one step in building power together in a movement-building process that far exceeds the Whitney Museum’. In this sense, amplifying the staff’s specific demands was not an
end in itself; it rather presented an opportunity for a multitude of different groups and communities, not strictly limited to the art world, to coalesce into one movement. According to MTL Collective (2018a), ‘it is a matter of facilitating formations and decolonial solidarities over time that extend beyond any particular institution or demand, while remaining deeply attentive to the specificities of struggle’.

Evidently, Decolonize This Place’s analytical framework has been heavily influenced by black and decolonial pedagogies, methodologies, and epistemologies. For instance, Tuck and Yang, a constant reference point for the group, have illustrated the intimate intertwining of internal and external colonialism in the operation of settler colonialism. They have also identified multiple ‘settler moves to innocence’, namely the strategies, empty gestures, and set of evasions that aim at relieving the settlers’ feeling of guilt without actually ‘giving up land or power or privilege’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 10). They write: ‘When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 3). In this sense, Decolonize This Place seems to be shifting away from both a social justice perspective and a strictly anti-capitalist stance to an all-encompassing decolonial framework, while also being attentive to issues like race, class, and gender. The impetus of building broader decolonial solidarities is informed by the understanding that since capitalism, patriarchy, and structural racism form a constellation of dominating and exploitative power relations that function in concert, all struggles against different forms of colonization, dispossession, and displacement can overlap and align with one another. Such decolonial solidarities can be evinced by movements like Idle No More in Canada, Black Lives Matter in the US, and No Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock. They also find affinities with direct action groups from the 1960s that engaged with predominantly white institutions foregrounding issues of reparations and redistribution, and with grassroots groups that have set out, more recently, to decolonize museums and universities (see D’Souza, 2018). The triangulation of Indigenous struggle, black liberation, and Free Palestine constitutes the focal point of Decolonize This Place, and, according to the group, ‘decolonization as an analytic enables us to highlight intersections between such struggles without collapsing them’ (MTL Collective, 2018b: 197). Building on Fanon (2004: 2), who argued that ‘Decolonization never goes unnoticed, for it focuses on and fundamentally alters being’, activists went to great lengths to argue that decolonization is less about notions like tolerance, recognition, and diversity than a combative, creative, and context-specific process of self-liberation through struggle.

As activists underlined, US arts and cultural institutions and their boards oftentimes consolidate deep-rooted systemic injustices and are implicated in historical and ongoing structures of oppression. Some of these connections were made evident in the Whitney case after it was revealed that the same tear gas produced by Safariland that was used at the Tijuana border had been also used against Native American water protectors at Standing Rock Reservation, Black Lives Matter protesters in Ferguson, and Palestinian refugees in Gaza. According to activists, this provided a further testament to the involvement of Kanders’s company in the consolidation of the military-industrial complex and the industry of repression, both domestically and internationally, allowing Kanders to profit directly from white supremacy and the subjugation of black, brown, Latinx, and Indigenous peoples.
The activists also aimed to inscribe the Whitney crisis into the broader context of settler colonialism and ‘hyper-gentrification’. According to them, the Whitney’s new $422 million building not only stands on unceded indigenous lands, and specifically the territory of the Lenape – as the Whitney now openly acknowledges on its website – but also played a crucial part in the ‘revitalization’ of the meatpacking district in lower Manhattan. The acceleration of real estate investments and luxury residential developments resulted in the displacement of its residents, dramatically altering the composition of the historically working class, queer, and LGBTQ youth neighbourhood. Indeed, the deployment of art as a means of mass displacement is palpable, especially when the creative industries serve as a driving force to repackage areas targeted for redevelopment and financial speculation. In this respect, activists sought to situate the ongoing contestations over urban space within successive waves of displacement that can be traced all the way back to the original dispossession of native lands. In other words, for activists, the historical colonization of indigenous bodies, spaces, and lands finds a new manifestation in the form of gentrification, understood ‘as re-assertion, re-invigoration or reproduction of colonial relations that operate through, and are intertwined with, the reproduction of capitalism in the settler landscape’ (Tunali, 2021: 7). This resonates both with Wolfe’s (2006: 388) argument that invasion is a ‘structure’ not an ‘event’ and with Coulthard’s (2014: 125, original emphasis) assertion that ‘settler-colonial formations are territorially acquisitive in perpetuity’. Hence, the Whitney controversy served as an unprecedented opportunity for Decolonize This Place to organize, mobilize, and advance a decolonial agenda, since not only did it foreground questions of toxic philanthropy, labour rights, and the complicity of arts institutions in ongoing processes of displacement and dispossession, but also rendered apparent the connections between seemingly disparate struggles.

A Diversity of Strategies and Tactics

Decolonize This Place’s theory of action is grounded in decolonial thinking, epistemic disobedience, and different principles of knowledge production that have been disempowered by European modernity. According to Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006: 207), ‘knowledge and subjectivities have been and continue to be shaped by the colonial and imperial differences that structured the modern/colonial world’. For Quijano (2007: 169), political colonialism, predicated upon a specific power structure and systematic repression that produced racial and ethnic discriminations, might have been eliminated; however, the colonial domination of Western culture persists, as evinced in the ‘colonization of the imagination of the dominated’. It is from this perspective that the activists’ campaign attempted to foreground subaltern experiences and decolonial modes of knowledge-making that have been deemed ‘inferior’ by hegemonic discourses structured by the colonial difference. This is encapsulated in what they call ‘movement-generated theory’: an attentiveness to the silenced knowledges that already exist within communities, a way of questioning that is experience-based and stems from the ground-up, and a training in ‘the practice of freedom’ (hooks, 1994). In this sense, theory and practice are perceived as intimately intertwined; knowing, being, and doing become inseparable; and in accordance with other prefigurative models, any theorization takes place through praxis and in action.
It is through these lenses that Decolonize This Place connected the Whitney controversy with broader social movements, establishing an escalation calendar comprised of ‘9 Weeks of Art and Action’, a series of weekly direct actions, beginning on 22 March and concluding on 17 May, coinciding in that way with the 2019 Whitney Biennial opening. The schedule provided a horizon for actions, allowing different grassroots groups and other stakeholders to propose independent actions and to apply manifold pressure points, reflective of their respective interests, privilege, and leverage. The intention was that this constellation of modes of engagement would not overlap with the Biennial, leaving enough space for artists to play their part in whatever way they deemed appropriate. Decolonize This Place served as a container and a centralized communication platform, providing support for other initiatives, while safeguarding the autonomy of every participating group. This meant that the group served both as an analytical tool to establish points of intersection between different communities and an infrastructure for logistics, research, and tactical ‘know-how’, organizing numerous research and production meetings prior to the launching of the ‘9 Weeks of Art and Action’. The commitment to the organization of well-rehearsed actions and the self-allocation of tasks and responsibilities according to availability and skillset constituted core principles of the campaign. In fact, this was not Decolonize This Place’s first campaign against a New York museum, nor were its members unfamiliar with the intricacies that both protesting art and the art of protest entail. According to the group’s organizers, not only do such campaigns build collective power and community bonds, but they are also ‘designed to create crises of governance for institutions, putting them in “decision dilemmas”’ (MTL Collective, 2018a). This is premised on their understanding that institutions are not uniform entities but are comprised of conflicting interests, and that by putting enough pressure and exasperating existing crises, the situation can be pushed to a tipping point where the leadership is forced to change course, triggering broader structural changes. What the group calls ‘decision dilemmas’ I would translate in Marchart’s (2019: 40) terminology as ‘precisely attempts to test out the antagonistic quality of a given situation’. In the Whitney case, the escalation of disruptive tactics served as a means both to satisfy a specific demand (‘Kanders must go’) and to consolidate a broader decolonial movement across the city and beyond.

For its part, W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) took a different approach. Having introduced programmes like W.A.G.E. certification for institutions that have committed to paying artists’ fees that meet minimum remuneration standards and by supplying artists with digital tools, like WAGENCY, that allow them to negotiate fair compensation, the group’s methodologies resemble those of a labour union. W.A.G.E. serves both as a mechanism that supplies the artists’ workforce with collective bargaining power and a means to pressure institutions to pay artists liveable wages. Providing an opportunity to support both artists and workers, the demands of the letter’s signatories became W.A.G.E.’s (2019) epicentre, since, according to the group, ‘what makes the Whitney crisis unique is that it came about not because of the public dissent of artists, but through the private dissent of a group of full-time employees and part-time contracted workers’. In solidarity with these workers and through an open letter, W.A.G.E. invited the still unannounced artists in the 2019 Whitney Biennial to do two things: demand to be paid for the content they provide and withhold that content using WAGENCY until
the demands of Whitney’s staff are met. In this sense, W.A.G.E. re-directed its infrastructures, already geared to putting pressure ‘from within’, to allow artists to take a collective stand. No Biennial artist responded directly to W.A.G.E.’s call since the invitation came after they had signed a mandatory Non-Disclosure Agreement, prohibiting them from revealing their participation. However, W.A.G.E.’s letter did play a crucial role in the conversations and collective actions that followed; as will become evident, collective organizing became more feasible after the public announcement of the participating artists in the Biennial.

Protest, Performance, and Prefiguration: ‘9 Weeks of Art and Action’

The ‘9 Weeks of Art and Action’ demonstrated how direct action can inscribe acts of solidarity into broader movement building, as evidenced by the more than 30 grassroots groups and collectives that mobilized at the Whitney every week. For instance, for the first week, nearly 200 protestors organized an unannounced assembly in front of Andy Warhol’s Camouflage Last Supper (1986) with banners reading ‘brought to you by Safariland’, ‘artwashing blood money’, and ‘Whitney Museum: No space for profiteers of state violence’. Protestors formed a half-circle around the painting and, in the form of a mic check, provided the underscoring for the same argument: ‘our liberation is either collective, or non-existent’. The role of private funding and toxic philanthropy in the cultural field was tackled during the third week. In what was considered an autonomous action, more than 120 prominent theorists and critics, including Claire Bishop, Hal Foster, and Rosalyn Deutsche (and later a number of participating artists in the 2019 Whitney Biennial), signed an open letter demanding the resignation of Kanders. Released by Verso, the letter argued that ‘the stakes of the demand to remove Kanders are high and extend far beyond the art world’, pointing to ‘broader patterns of toxic philanthropy’ on museum boards and accentuating the fact that a seat at the museums’ decision-making table is dependent on the tax-deductible charity of wealthy individuals (Arroyo et al., 2019). It also hinted towards a broader phenomenon, namely the increasing privatization of the arts and culture domain (along with the surrender of the public sphere to market metrics) under neoliberal ideology’s rise to hegemony that has signalled the erosion of democratic institutions and the very principle of accountability in cultural and political policy (see Brown, 2015).

During the eighth week of actions, (D)IRT – the (De)Institutional Research Team – an autonomous research collective of artists, activists, cultural workers, and academics established under Decolonize This Place’s facilitation, devised an alternative version of the museum’s visitor guide, crystallizing a mode of conducting research as direct action. In an act of détournement, the fake guide imitated the aesthetics and layout of the official museum document, allowing it to be dispersed undetected throughout the museum and inviting visitors to explore issues like museum ethics, labour rights, gentrification, and artwashing. In addition, (D)IRT’s brochure included an analytical list identifying 16 additional trustees (and/or their families) who profit from the military-industrial complex that enables state violence through various financial institutions, while noting that Whitney had only four people of colour on its 52-member board. Other weeks’ actions,
hosting groups like Decolonial Time Zone, the Movement to Protect the People, and Queer Youth Power, focused on pedagogical activities, well-orchestrated performances, and mutual aid. For instance, the second week involved the chanting of and dancing to indigenous and black freedom songs in the museum’s lobby, the fourth week consisted of a potluck party, while during the seventh week protestors and museum visitors held ‘teach-in’ sessions.3 As co-founder of Decolonize This Place, Nitasha Dhillon, stated: ‘this is why this work is really important: to keep connecting, keep unsettling, keep unlearning’.

In this way, the activists’ actions contained a performative and prefigurative dimension, unleashing the power of collective imagination and challenging the institution’s very principles of governance. During the activists’ actions, spaces like the Whitney were appropriated, marginal roles were centred, while means and ends were folded into each other. By assembling at the Whitney, activists exercised their ‘plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field’, demonstrating that staging the political involves the crossing of a discursive performativity (i.e., slogans, banners, etc.) and a performativity that is affective and embodied (e.g. blockades, human barricades, dances) (Butler, 2015: 11). In this sense, by complementing novel modes of collective enunciation with the deployment of politically engaged affect, corporeality, and embodied experience, activists’ actions alluded to Mignolo’s (2009: 174) argument that ‘body-politics is a fundamental component of decolonial thinking, decolonial doing and the decolonial option’.

The prefigurative element of these actions resided in the act of interrupting, even momentarily, the museum’s daily function and repurposing it from a semi-private space into a terrain of confrontation, mobilization, and political struggle. Activists aimed to prefigure a museum that adheres to the principles of transparency and accountability, a museum governing body that is not composed of affluent philanthropists but local community members, and a vision of cultural production that is not sustained by capitalist means and colonial traditions. Participation in these actions was less about seizing institutions or state power than ‘delegitimizing and dismantling mechanisms of rule while winning ever-larger spaces of autonomy from it’, as well as experiencing, albeit momentarily, ‘another world’ (Graeber, 2002: 68). Indeed, if prefiguration is the most strategic means for movements striving for social change, activists opted to breathe life into novel modes of grassroots decision-making processes and to enact a politics of solidarity in the here and now that sought to prefigure radical alternatives to the multifaceted dimensions of colonial domination (see Maeckelbergh, 2011). This form of ‘visionary’ or ‘transformative’ organizing, according to Grace Lee Boggs, aims at tearing down oppressive structures while rehearsing a different future by developing alternative institutions and by nourishing people’s creative capacity. The creation of such horizontal, non-dominating, and autonomous infrastructures serving as alternative hubs of decolonization and movement building indicates that political action is taking new organizational forms that are an integral part of the broader political ecosystem of the post-Occupy condition.

In addition, the activists’ creative direct actions encapsulated new forms of civil disobedience and non-violent warfare that unleashed the cultural commons from below. These gestures of resistance served as disruptive moments to the exclusions of luxury consumption and the tendencies of cultural commodification and capitalist valorization. 
In sharp contrast to the spectacular culture’s imperatives, it was the well-coordinated deployment of banners, the highly choreographed performances of flash-mobs, and the imaginative détournement of the museum’s imagery to decorate activist flyers and imposter guides that instantiated art forms in themselves. This movement-based form of cultural production attempted to break with the all-pervasive notion of authorship and instead exemplified art as collective action, based on empowerment and community building. Instead of solely relying on cultural institutions as the arbiters for conferring ‘affirmative’ recognition, activists instantiated a ‘resurgent politics of recognition’ premised on cultural practices of self-determination and self-actualization that oppose the coloniality of power (Coulthard, 2014: 18). In the words of the activists, ‘when communities make artworks and artists become organizers the normal hierarchy of artistic production falls apart’, invoking Benjamin (1979: 237–8), for whom the revolutionary artist had to transform himself from a ‘supplier of the productive apparatus into an engineer who sees it as his task to adapt this apparatus to the purposes of the proletarian revolution’.

For the culmination of the ‘9 Weeks of Art and Action’, Decolonize This Place extended a citywide mobilization call to all the groups that had participated in the campaign. In a coordinated intervention, activists unfurled banners from the museum’s sixth-floor terrace, reading ‘when we breathe, we breathe together’, and the assembled crowd beneath chanted the words rhythmically while entering the Whitney. As the last action was coming to an end, activists gave Kanders an ultimatum: ‘Fall is the deadline. We will be back if necessary. And our tactics will escalate further. In the meantime, we expect others will act and organize’.

**The Tear Gas Biennial**

The 79th iteration of the Whitney Biennial opened its doors as one of the most diverse and inclusive exhibitions to date, with the majority of the 75 participants emerging artists of colour. Yet, according to activists, the fact that the museum was taking steps to decentre the artistic canon on a representational level stood in sharp contrast to an institutional framework that was complicit in state-sanctioned violence, toxic sponsorship, and systemic racism. As (D)IRT put it in their makeshift publication, ‘artists do the work of addressing issues around economic disparity, race, gender, and sexuality, advocating for change. Meanwhile, Whitney trustees continue to function in, profit from, and perpetuate systems of oppression and inequality’.

Responding to the activists’ call, some of the Biennial’s participants took action against Kanders, proving that artists can come together around a specific demand while assuming a diversity of approaches. For instance, Forensic Architecture decided to take on the Whitney’s vice-chairman directly by incorporating political commentary in their work. The London-based research agency’s submission for the Whitney Biennial constituted a 10-minute video (‘Triple-Chaser’, 2019) that detected not only the prevalence of Safariland’s munitions around the world by deploying machine learning technology, but also the usage of Sierra Bullets (another Kanders-owned company) in Gaza, suggesting that the export of small arms ammunition to the Israeli army may be aiding and abetting war crimes. Before entering the projection room, visitors were welcomed by a wall text
that read: ‘to date, Forensic Architecture has found evidence of tear gas manufactured by Safariland being used against civilians in fourteen countries, including six states or territories of the United States’.

Subsequently, in what looked like a coordinated action, eight exhibiting artists announced their intention to withdraw from the show, following the publication of an essay from artists and writers Hannah Black, Ciarán Finlayson, and Tobi Haslett. In their essay, entitled ‘The Tear Gas Biennial’, published via *Artforum*, the authors made a powerful plea to the exhibiting artists to remove their artworks from the Biennial before its closing date in September. Where the essay differentiated itself from previous calls to boycott the Biennial was in two crucial and interrelated points. On the one hand, it took artists to task by challenging the ideological argument against any explicit politicization of art that allows them to proclaim their work as ‘political’ in a vacuum, cut off from any concrete political situation. This approach has been partly legitimised by Rancière’s (2010: 141) writings, where he claims that artistic strategies are indispensable ‘to make the invisible visible or to question the self-evidence of the visible’ but seems to be dismissive of more ‘militant’ or overly politicized art forms, since all art, according to him, by virtue of contributing to the ‘distribution of the sensible’, is in and of itself political. According to the authors, ‘there are moments when the disembodied, declarative politics of art are forced into an encounter with real politics, i.e., with violence’ (Black et al., 2019). Recognizing boycott as a distinctly political tactic, they argued, there could be no better setting for its deployment than a biennial, one of the nodal points in the production, circulation, and consumption of art. By disrupting the circuits of valorization that sustain art’s economy, the repercussions of a boycott could exceed the mere symbolic level and have tangible, material, and political effects.

On the other hand, they deconstructed the main argument against boycott, namely that the burden of protest should not fall on artists of colour, who have been historically silenced and excluded from the art canon. In sharp contrast to those who claimed that the unprecedented presence of artists of colour in the biennial was enough, the authors countered that this ‘view promotes the reactionary fiction that marginalized or working-class people are the passive recipients of political activity as opposed to its main driver’ (Black et al., 2019). Although acknowledging the fact that whoever – and historically sidelined artists in particular – assumes the ‘wrong’ politics risks being alienated by the art system, they asserted that this is exactly what gives these acts of refusal their potency, namely that they have stakes. In other words, strikes and boycotts have never been marks of luxury, but rather sites of urgency and ongoing struggle, and while an antagonistic site might rise inadvertently, one is nonetheless confronted with the exigency of taking sides. As anti-apartheid leader Desmond Tutu eloquently put it, ‘if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor’, accentuating both the divisions that cut through the social and the necessity of taking sides when a political situation occurs (in Ratcliffe, 2017). The essay’s authoritative rhetoric urging artists to take an explicit political stance proved decisive. Warren Kanders, presumably unaware of Forensic Architecture’s video submission and pressured by the artists’ announced withdrawal from the Biennial, decided to resign from the Whitney’s Board of Trustees after 13 years on the board. Both he and his wife, co-chairwoman of the museum’s painting and sculpture committee, stepped down, having donated more than $10 million to the Whitney.
The Next Day

Valuable conclusions can be drawn from the Whitney controversy. In sharp contrast to the Whitney director’s proclamations that the museum represents ‘our community’ and ‘a shared commitment’, activists challenged the very principle of counting who belongs to the community and who is excluded. Whereas the initial attempt of the Whitney staff was silenced by the police order that allocated them a subordinate place and role, the political dimension of the activists’ actions consisted in re-qualifying them in order to be recognized as the place of the community. By holding the museum leadership accountable, activists challenged ‘the police distribution of parts, places or competences’, exposed the inherent antagonisms that permeate any social order, and reenacted the ‘power of the people’ (Rancière, 2010: 54). As has been stressed, they repudiated the façade of neutrality that oftentimes serves as a shield to protect museums from criticism, hiding the real discrepancies between the interests of their governing bodies, their staff, and the various communities they claim to serve. In fact, the museum’s assertion that it recognizes marginalized voices with generous gestures of inclusivity and diversity via representation stood in direct conflict not only with the failure to address the ‘historical withholding of the “permission to narrate”’, but with the present-day perpetuation of exclusions and the unequal distribution of power, resources, and cultural authority (Spivak, 2012: 66).

In addition, when activists claimed, ‘when we breathe, we breathe together’, they demonstrated that the practice of freedom constitutes a collective endeavour, since, following Butler (2015: 89), ‘freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us, or, indeed, among us’. Especially in the context of the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement and the unprecedented global wave of protest that followed the death of George Floyd in 2020, the struggle over the right to breathe and the inherently interconnected ‘practice of freedom’ have returned with a vengeance. By enacting an antagonistic scene at the threshold of the institution, the activists’ struggle for liberation was informed by a decolonial intersectional analysis that sought to unveil the various ways in which ‘the major systems of oppression’ are ‘interlocking’ and the multiple categories of suffering are mutually reinforcing (Combahee River Collective, 2017: 15). The movement against Kanders’s technologies of violence and suffocation foregrounded the impetus of building a ‘we’ based both on the negation of the intimately intertwined oppressive structures and the understanding that a translative project between a diversity of seemingly uncorrelated struggles must be undertaken, premised less on a homogenizing unity or assimilation than on the axioms of difference, multiplicity, and intercultural communication. Forging a critical alliance between the ‘unaccounted’ or the ‘actively precarious’, as well as centring the body as the locus of a shared human vulnerability, I contend, constituted such an attempt to galvanize inter-dependences and to solidify community bonds that far exceed the art world.

A final point needs to be made here. In sharp contrast to most critics who appeared eager to give credit either to the activists’ tactics or to the artists’ dissent for forcing the resignation of Kanders, I offer a different reading. What allowed the original act of protest by the Whitney staff to break through the police order was that it was amplified by various actors that created multiple fronts of sustained collective pressure both from
inside and outside the institution. While the activists’ agitational efforts were essential to activate the latent splits of the Whitney, it was the variety of tactics, including critical research, explicitly political exhibition design, subtle guerrilla actions, and other diplomatic means of propagation that contributed to the eventual resignation of Kanders. The events that transpired during the Whitney controversy demonstrated that for the disruption of the dominant (police) order there were three requirements that were inexorably intertwined: a staging of the political that was both discursive and embodied, a critical alliance between the unaccounted, and a critique of the power imbalances that constitute the very space of appearance and dictate the terms of eligibility for entering it. In this sense, the staging of antagonism, I argue, should be considered neither an isolated case of dissent, nor the result of a spectacular gesture of activist radicalism. Political protest is not solely a disruptive, ruptural, spontaneous, and episodic event, but rather depends on long-term organizing processes and prior movement building. In order to be inscribed, divisions and antagonisms must be built upon and they necessarily involve a collectivity of agents. In this respect, conflictual events might attract visibility, but ‘these are just condensations of larger and much more protracted struggles’, making activist organization only one, though indispensable, part of a longer process of radical social change (Marchart, 2019: 17).

This article shed light on the Whitney controversy that has opened a whole new can of worms pertaining to questions of museum governance, funding structures, and accountability in a time of mounting inequalities and racial violence. As demonstrated, by bridging creative activism and grassroots organizing, activists managed to unearth the antagonisms that lie dormant in any given institutional structure, hence pushing others to take a side. However, such highly visible protest actions risk not only succumbing to the corrosive impact of the ‘attention economy’ by being turned into a media spectacle where the details and nuances of particular struggles are flattened out, but also being co-opted or recuperated by the very institution they set out to critique in the first place. In this sense, it is only the continuity, sustainability, and long-term organization of artistic activist practices that can forge a passage from dispersed micro-political tactics of disruption to the consolidation of collective antagonisms and to macro-political strategies aiming at the democratization of cultural institutions.

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Notes
1. If we are to follow Althusser, all major social institutions, including parties, schools, trade
unions, churches, and cultural associations, belong to the ideological state apparatuses, hence
embody the ideology of the dominant class and serve as instruments of class domination.
2. Artist Michael Rakowitz, in tandem with W.A.G.E.’s invitation, declared his withdrawal from
the exhibition, before the list of participants was even released.
3. Interestingly enough, although members of the Whitney staff had attended Decolonize This
Place’s introductory meetings, their ‘inside organizing’ came to a halt when the escalation
calendar was launched.

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