

ARTICULATING ACTIVISM

WORKS FROM THE SHELLEY AND DONALD RUBIN
PRIVATE COLLECTION

Only Art Endures: The Impact and Embodiment of Activism

I can't tell you what art does and how it does it, but I know that often art has judged the judges, pleaded revenge to the innocent and shown to the future what the past suffered, so that it has never been forgotten. I know too that the powerful fear art, whatever its form, when it does this, and that amongst the people such art sometimes runs like a rumor and a legend because it makes sense of what life's brutalities cannot, a sense that unites us, for it is inseparable from a justice at last. Art, when it functions like this, becomes a meeting-place of the invisible, the irreducible, the enduring, guts, and honor.¹

—John Berger

The expansiveness of art and activism since the 1960s—in subject, medium, and the shifting perception of it—as journeying towards something everyone can experience, has seen its natural conclusion in socially-engaged artistic practice, with society as its perpetually moving inspiration. Artists no longer exclusively observe and make at a remove, but often include the public directly, seeing them as participants and collaborators. Reality has become a relevant predicament to tackle as subjects including history, society, and materiality are again the norm in mainstream contemporary culture. Those in this exhibition exemplify this compulsion or passion in a variety of media. How we see our bodily reality, reality as information through text-art, and political reality are the central threads examined in *Articulating Activism: Works from the Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection*. The great social and political upheaval of the post-War period saw artists moving away from abstraction and illusion into the creation of a new iconography, geared towards social responsibility.² The rise of activism enabled an empowerment—they no longer needed to remain on the sidelines or within the strictures of codified modernism. Instead, they became exponents of—and intrinsic to—progress, pushing society forward. Taking on the mantle of both witness and participant, artists have impacted public perception and awareness of issues such as the Civil and Gay Rights Movements, AIDS, and Feminism.

In a time when art, institutions, and cultural producers are increasingly criticized for *not* taking a stand—these individuals represent community, albeit from a singular standpoint. They continually put themselves on the

line—speaking to us visually through images, messaging, or a combination of both. Through editing, aesthetics, and composition, they synthesize information and data in a way that is as easily communicable as it is consumable, and can be made for wide distribution to the masses. The autobiographical nature of many works in this exhibition affirm the intrinsic link between the maker, the politics, the personal, and the advocate. In many cases, it is difficult to separate the causes and issues from the artist's own identity. Art alone can't directly change policy or laws, but can be the catalyst for both—the defiant act of speaking out can galvanize the public, or those in power, to enact change. Both individually and collectively, the works in *Articulating Activism* demonstrate art's power as a tool to champion social equality and stand against oppressive societal conditions, providing a voice and illuminating struggles on a global scale.

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Gonkar Gyatso, *My Identity 2*, 2007. Chromogenic print. Courtesy of the artist and Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong.



Gonkar Gyatso, *My Identity 3*, 2007. Chromogenic print. Courtesy of the artist and Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong.

Visual depiction of the self in positive societal roles is essential to the building of personal identity, that sense of being reflected through the society an individual inhabits, allows them to be stakeholders within that culture. In this regard, photography has functioned as a form of truth telling, or rather the subjective representation of truth. Self-portraiture in this medium can be a potent form of resistance, used for that purpose to great effect by Gonkar Gyatso and Carlos Martiel. In Gyatso's 2007 series *My Identity*, he plays with notions of national identity, the political and ideological separation of people, and censorship. Division of self is explicit in his practice, in colonialist societies many individuals develop fragmented personalities and identities as a survival technique, seemingly autonomous, but at the same time complicit in outward appearances. By visualizing this plurality, he illustrates a kinship with others whose backgrounds and narratives are formed by a similar set of circumstances. Each photograph depicts Gyatso seated at a canvas in different guises that, together, demonstrate the shifting ideologies and conflicts within contemporary Tibetan identity. Two are dialectical opposites, in *My Identity 2* he wears green fatigues and a Chairman Mao hat, depicting himself as

a Communist Chinese painter. On the easel is a portrait of Mao Tse-Tung in the typical socialist realist style associated with propaganda. Although the subject is an artist, he is one at the service of the state. On the other end of the spectrum, in *My Identity 3* he appears as a contemporary refugee, the room is made of corrugated metal, the ground is cracked concrete. His suitcase, with a portrait of the Dalai Lama on top of it, is all that is indicated of his personal effects. This subject's existence only occurs due to the existence of the other self, the Maoist. While Gyatso has the power to control his own image, these works also show the conflict rife in identifying with an occupied country.

Attempts to acquire nationality and the predicament of refugee status are dealt with in the work of Carlos Martiel, whose *Expulsion* (2015) photographs are the documentation of a piece originally presented at the 4th Thessaloniki Performance Festival in 2015. Martiel's endurance-based practice often tests the limits of his own physical capacity and that of the audience as witness. In the performance the twelve stars of the European Union flag were stitched to his bare chest, and then carefully removed. Reminiscent of Gyatso, he reflects the pain of wearing an alien identity. His process of affixation, removal, and mutilation draws a parallel to the experience of migrants—who, even after being granted asylum or citizenship, retain a ghostly scar of what was left behind. Although we don't see what violence happens to immigrants in border camps and crossings, Martiel makes it ours to confront, ours to witness, and it upsets our ethical self-perception. The migrant's plight in statelessness, of wanting to join the European Union, the price of assimilation, and the struggle to belong are all embodied in his physical presence. In strategy, both artists employ depiction, the difference being Gyatso is self-referential, while Martiel speaks on behalf of an external group from a universal and humanist stance, he is every immigrant, every human.

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María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Freedom Trap*, 2013. Chromogenic color print. Courtesy of the artist.

Continuing the thread of self-portraiture as an act of resistance, Ana Mendieta and María Magdalena Campos-Pons use photography as a means to challenge the male and colonialist gaze, obtaining ownership over their depiction and that of women—particularly women of color. The largely one-sided nature of female representation in art history was put into perspective by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*—“men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women



Firelei Báez, *Zafa Fukú* (April 30th, 2012), 2015. Acrylic and ink on paper. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan.

watch themselves being looked at... The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.”²³ The portrayal of feminine passivity prized throughout the entire history of art, has manifested in real and allegorical figures symbolizing muse, Madonna, and concubine, delivering incessant, repetitive, unrealistic narratives. Disrupting that tradition, these artists weaponize their own objecthood. The result is a defiant empowerment, their works are confrontational to the viewer, to the point that some might be initially repulsed, or uncomfortable. Neither assigns themselves to traditional ideas of aesthetic feminine beauty. Although Mendieta’s physically fragmented self can be seen in *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)*, 1972, with her sexual organs directly photographed and displayed, there is no element of sexuality, or the erotic. She defies the fetishistic and misogynistic sectioning of the body seen in Gustave Courbet’s *L’Origine du Monde* (1866). She is not the muse, but instead the voyeur, impressing herself uncomfortably on a glass pane in the way that the male gaze has—and continues to, even fifty years on from this piece’s

completion—impressed itself upon women to the point of claustrophobia. One phenomena of post-internet society is the digital commodification, segmentation, and 24/7 global circulation of women’s bodies, which are essentially divorced from the original “self.” In light of this, Mendieta’s photographs seem eerily prescient. How far have women come in terms of owning their self-image?

In Campos-Pons’ *Freedom Trap* (2013) she wears what has the appearance of a scold’s bridle, yet the “trap” is self-imposed. She gazes from a cage-like web of threads, challenging the viewer, not looking down in shame, but rather outwards.

It captures women’s enduring spirit in the face of repression, in particular, those of African descent in the Caribbean. There is a grotesqueness inherent in Campos-Pons’ photograph, which evokes the suffering, violence, and bondage lived by so many. As the architect, instigator, and protagonist, these women are in control, however, their subjects remain uncomfortable. There is a cloistered, pressurized aspect to each of their works.

The potentially transformative power of the female gaze evidenced by Campos-Pons and Mendieta can also be seen in the work of Firelei Báez and Belkis Ayón. Both artists draw on personal heritage to explore the experiences, treatment, role, and subjugation of women in the Caribbean, challenging stereotypes and sexism in their reevaluation of history and mythologies. Prominent eyes and missing mouths are a hallmark of Ayón’s monochrome collagraphic prints. Her visual and symbolic investigation of the Abakuá, a secretive fraternal Afro-Caribbean society, was a way to address race and gender in Cuba. As explained by Sandra E. Garcia, “The female characters in Ms. Ayón’s works are without mouths to represent the absence of women in the Abakuá religion. Women are not allowed to participate in the society, but for Ms. Ayón, they were still a presence.”²⁴ The stalwart subject of her work is Sikán—a character from the syncretic religion’s creation myth—who accidentally uncovers their central deity and is sacrificed by the cult’s members, out of fear that she



Belkis Ayón, *Sin título (Figura negra que carga una blanca)* “Untitled (Black Figure Carrying a White One),” 1996. Collagraph. Courtesy of the Belkis Ayón Estate; Photo by José A. Figueroa.

will divulge their secret. In an interview with *Revolución y Cultura*, Ayón expanded on her subject matter, “People are intrigued because the eyes look at you directly, I believe that you cannot hide—wherever you go they are there, always looking at you, making you an accomplice of what you are seeing.”⁵ Báez is a natural extension of this sentiment. In her painting *Zafa Fukú (April 30th, 2012)*, 2015, the subject’s identifiable features are obscured, except for her eyes and hair, which is pulled back into a tight bun, a comment on the repressive laws governing the appearance of women of color in

the 18th Century Americas. We see that she is repressed, yet there is a reassuring strength in both her pose and gaze.

Understanding and interrogating our origins, beliefs, traditions, and mythologies, such as those mined by Ayón and Báez, has been a continual obsession for artists. The original purpose for art was the worship of deities or natural phenomena we didn’t yet understand, and its edifying properties were later intertwined with political cachet, implicit in currency and most consequentially propaganda. Frank Martínez, Shaun Leonardo, and Michael



Frank Martínez, *Sin título “Untitled,”* 2012. Charcoal on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Rakowitz reimagine iconic pieces of historical representation and media to examine the value and preservation of art, the cultural legacies of religion and protest, and the destruction of art objects through armed conflict and uprisings. Utilizing craft, collage, sculpture, and drawing, each embellishes, recontextualizes, or replaces aspects of the primary sources.

Our relationship to material objects in terms of our own humanity, including art, is a complex one, investigated by Rakowitz in his piece *May the Obdurate Foe Not Stay in Good Health* (2016), which highlights how cultural heritage is devastated by war. In this case, the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, where more than 7,000 objects of cultural heritage were looted from the National Museum in Baghdad. In an interview with *The Guardian* he stated, “As the artifacts disappeared, I was waiting for the loss to translate into outrage and grief for lost lives, but it didn’t happen. So I had the idea of these lost artifacts coming back as ghosts to haunt us.”⁶ Using the University of Chicago’s Oriental

Institute database and Interpol’s website, he reconstructs these ancient lost objects from recycled Middle-Eastern food packaging and newspapers, sourced in the United States, displaying them in a vitrine reminiscent of their original arrangement and presentation within the museum.

Propaganda, or truth in the media as the central constructor of our collective memory is deconstructed in the work of both Shaun Leonardo and Frank Martínez, who draw from well-known, widely distributed images, adding or removing elements as a way to meditate on pivotal events in modern history. Leonardo’s sequential drawings dissect bystander footage documenting the traumatic killings of Black men by the police, including *Eric Garner (drawings 1-6)*, 2015. In each frame, he emphasizes and removes elements from the original still, drawing attention to Garner’s plight, while also pointing to the normalized, desensitized relationship the public has to images of violence and tragedy. By removing the biased context of news network, reporter, and narrator, the viewer is left with the basic human trauma of being a witness to extreme injustice and racism.

Similar to Leonardo, Martínez’s *Sin título* (2012) utilizes an iconic image of tragedy—Joseph Louw’s photograph of Andrew Young and others on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, pointing towards the assailant in the aftermath of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. Emphasizing the unresolved nature of the murder, he has inserted a billboard

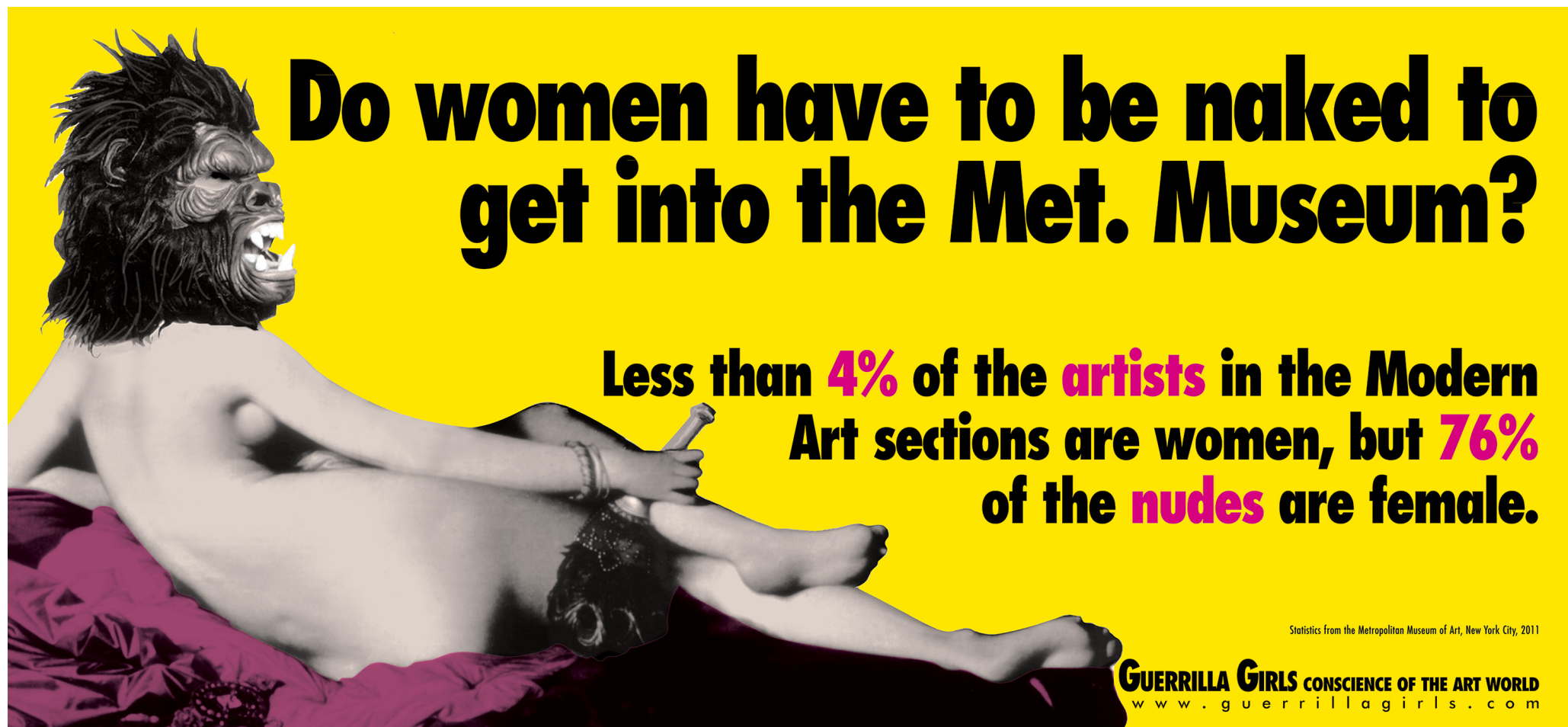


Shaun Leonardo, *Eric Garner (drawings 1-6)*, 2015. Charcoal on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

featuring a lone gunman in the upper left corner of the work. There is a ghostly quality in each artist's monochrome drawings, and although their choice of medium helps to distance the viewer from the horror—a dissociative remove from the banality of the violence depicted—the specter of loss and death remains. That acts of violence enabled these works to exist is inarguable and intrinsic to their message. The events inspiring the work of Rakowitz, Leonardo, and Martínez all precipitated massive public demonstrations, and the formation of discreet activist groups such as Black Lives Matter. Although respectful and memorial-like in tone, they enable the audience to address an uncomfortable history, while also pointing to ways in which we can be allies advocating for reform.

8 “To engage in protest is to offer public witness. Protest occurs in many forms. But when protesting, or witnessing, becomes sustained as a strategic set of actions, you have a social movement.”⁷

Although individuals in *Articulating Activism* ruminate on the role of witness, a pivotal shift in perspective emerged during the 1980s and 90s, with the formation of groups advocating directly for causes and equity. Both decades marked a move away from the lone artist, disavowing the notion of supreme creator or superstar and individual authorship, in favor of collective practices mirroring social movements from the 1960s and 70s.⁸ Artist-activist hybrids, such as ACT UP and the Guerrilla Girls, began to utilize text, data, and tactics of mass communication, mimicking commercial strategies.



Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have to be Naked to Get Into the Met. Museum?*, 2012. Offset print. © Guerrilla Girls, courtesy guerrillagirls.com.

These increased public awareness of inequalities on both an institutional and political level. Their output functions as an act of protest in and of itself, taking art outside of the white-cube space and into the street. ACT UP's seminal *Silence=Death* (1986) expands on the pink triangle that emerged in the 1970s as a symbol used by gay rights activists.

The collective, formed in 1987, was largely comprised of individuals with visual arts, advertising, and media backgrounds, who understood the saturated, commodified visual landscape, weaponizing these strategies to advocate and inform the public about the AIDS epidemic. The resulting poster campaign, wheat pasted throughout New York City, employed, in the words of T.V. Reed, a “strategic ambiguity... the equation was meant to, and on countless occasions did, evoke the question: “What does that mean?” As such, it became an invitation to prolonged discussion of the AIDS crisis.”⁹ The poster, in its infinite reproducibility, has had a global impact—its appropriation in a variety of forms and languages has a far-reaching legacy.

Guerrilla Girls, the anonymous collective founded in 1985, have been committed to fighting both racism and sexism in the art world. Since their inception, they've exposed the cultural

sector's inequality and gender bias in museology, art history, and representation. Appealing to our contemporary sensibilities and preference for infographics, their data-driven text and image works are both biting humor and subversive. *Do Women Have to be Naked to Get Into the Met. Museum?* is based on *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) by



José Ángel Toirac, *La Inmortalidad* "Immortality," 1998. Flatbed offset lithograph in one color on Arches cover white. Courtesy of the artist.

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and features a reclining woman donning one of the group's trademark Gorilla masks. The work has been updated periodically to reflect new statistics, the 2012 iteration states "Less than 4% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 76% of the nudes are female." This scandalous disparity, and the seemingly apparent level of stasis in museums and other cultural institutions is central to the conceptual drive of their oeuvre. Current movements to "decolonize" or "occupy" museums have grown out of this external reevaluation and critique of cultural institutions, instigated by artist-driven collectives such as these.

The pioneering text-based traditions of conceptual art in the 1970s, combined with the media strategies of the 1980s and 90s have had a lasting reverberation on contemporary culture. José Ángel Toirac, Tony Cokes, Dread Scott, and Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds utilize messaging and hone text, be it a political or poetic statement, or even a simple word—"Fidel" in the case of Toirac's *La Inmortalidad* (1998). The encouragement and utilization of fear, and mythmaking, is portrayed by both Cokes and Scott, who use pop-culture as a reference, exploiting new media tropes, such as music videos and social media. Cokes' *Evil.12. (edit.b): Fear, Spectra & Fake Emotions* (2009) attempts

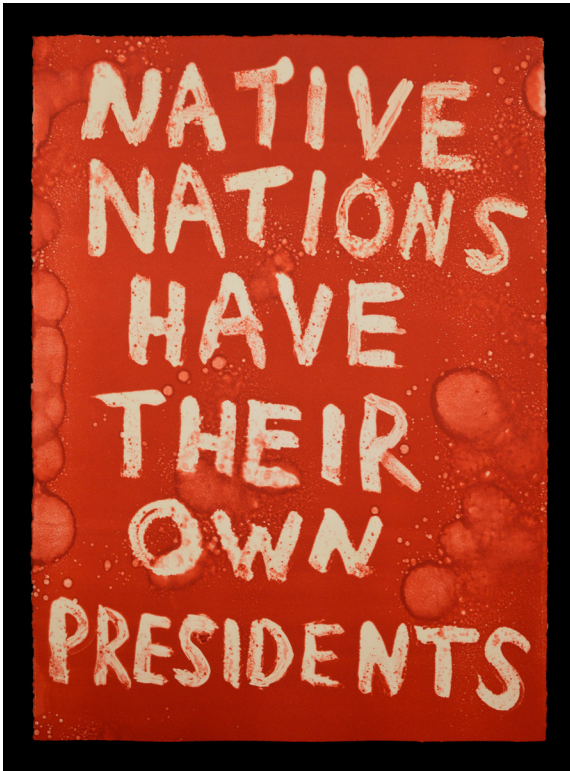
to make sense of the politically motivated colored-coded Homeland Security Advisory System implemented after the September 11th terrorist attacks, highlighting the system's manipulative potential—a spike in the color alert would quickly register as news—casting a continuous shadow of fear over the American public for an unknown and unseen threat.¹⁰ Scott's *#WhileBlack* (2018), structured as list of hashtags, explores the ways in which racial identity impacts the daily activities and existence of Black Americans, laying bare the constraints of systemic, embedded racism. Read in

succession, the conditions—*#RunningWhileBlack* *#DrivingWhileBlack* *#BreathingWhileBlack*—imply that citizenship does not equate to equal protection under the law, even in the mundane, ordinary tasks performed in quotidian life. Scott and Cokes' bombardment of information is contrasted by the singular slogans present in Heap of Birds' series of monoprints *Native Survival In spite of Empire* (2020). Poetically addressing the theft of ancestral Indigenous lands, history of forced relocation, and violent conflict, he graphically challenges the ongoing occupation of Native American land throughout US history, asserting "Native Nations Have Their Own Presidents."

The artists and collectives in *Articulating Activism* have reshaped our understanding of the cultural and political landscape, and continue to do so. They are committed to social change, using their platform as public figures to take



Dread Scott, *#WhileBlack*, 2018. Screen print. Courtesy of Dread Scott.



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, *Native Nations Have Their Own Presidents*, 2020. Courtesy of Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds.

a stand. Uniquely situated, they simultaneously straddle multiple spheres of influence, drawing attention to injustices, widening the base of support, often allying themselves with underserved and underrepresented populations. Visualizing struggle and hardship, works in the exhibition mobilize emotions in the viewer or public, creating empathy and awareness through the combination of aesthetics and message. They are bold and unafraid in subject matter—which may make some viewers uncomfortable—and in the way they inhabit their positions, even at the risk of personal or professional detriment. An example of this is Michael Rakowitz pulling out of the 2019 Whitney Biennial in protest of the museum’s now-former vice chairman Warren Kanders, a manufacturer of tear gas and military products used against migrants at the US Mexico border.¹¹ They encourage solidarity and spark discourse through embodied experience. Their activism is articulated through the primacy and foregrounding of the message, viewing art as a conduit to convey meaning to a wider audience in a manner distinct from other perceivably biased sources such as news media, politics, and academia. For a time, certain issues may be resolved in a given society, but the pendulumlike structure of any government or political agenda results in the frequent reversal of progress during transfers of power. Art is a way of enduring—creating something lasting at a time where information speeds by so

quickly, that a cycle doesn’t even have a chance to complete, before another has begun. Visual culture’s most potent power is that images can outlast their subjects.¹² What ultimately remains is the artist’s intention, its manifestation as an artwork, which guides us when we forget the progress of the past and seek it once again in the future.

—Anjuli Nanda Diamond, February 2022

Image Credit

Cover. Carlos Martiel, *Expulsion*, 2015. Chromogenic print on PVC. Originally staged in 2015 for the Thessaloniki Performance Festival, Greece. Courtesy of the artist.

Endnotes

¹ Berger, John. “Miners.” Essay. In *Keeping a Rendezvous*, Firsted., 5–10. New York, NY: Vintage International, 1992. 9.

² Foster, Hal. “The Return of the Real.” Essay. In *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, 127–70. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996. 127-128.

³ Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London, UK: BBC and Penguin, 1972. 47.

⁴ Garcia, Sandra E. “Overlooked No More: Belkis Ayón, a Cuban Printmaker Inspired by a Secret Male Society.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, March 8, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/obituaries/overlooked-belkis-ayon.html>.

⁵ Sarusky, Jaime. “Speaking of the Myths of Art.” *Revolución y Cultura Magazine* 2, no. 3, February 4, 1999. <http://www.ayonbelkis.cult.cu/en/speaking-of-the-myths-of-art/>.

⁶ Armitstead, Claire. “Fourth Plinth: How a Winged Bull Made of Date Syrup Cans Is Defying Isis.” *The Guardian*. *Guardian News and Media*, March 26, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/mar/26/michael-rakowitz-invisible-enemy-should-not-exist-fourth-plinth-winged-bull-date-syrup-cans-defying-isis>.

Back Cover. Tsherin Sherpa, *Preservation Project #1*, 2009. Gouache, acrylic, and gold on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi.

⁷ Reed, Thomas V. *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Present*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. Xiii.

⁸ O’Grady, Megan. “The Artists Bringing Activism into and beyond Gallery Spaces.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, October 1, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/01/t-magazine/art-activism-forensic-architecture.html>.

⁹ Reed, Thomas V. *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Present*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. 209.

¹⁰ Massumi, Brian. “Fear (The Spectrum Said).” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 13, no. 1 (2005): 31-48. muse.jhu.edu/article/185296.

¹¹ Carrigan, Margaret, and Victoria Stapley-Brown. “I Stand in Solidarity with the Staff and Say No’: Michael Rakowitz on Why He Turned down the Whitney Biennial.” *The Art Newspaper—International art news and events*, February 26, 2019. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/02/27/i-stand-in-solidarity-with-the-staff-and-say-no-michael-rakowitz-on-why-he-turned-down-the-whitney-biennial>.

¹² Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London, UK: BBC and Penguin, 1972. 10.

Articulating Activism: Works from the Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection is curated by George Bolster and Anjuli Nanda Diamond. March 3—June 18, 2022. *Articulating Activism* features works by ACT UP, Belkis Ayón, Firelei Báez, Abel Barroso, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Tony Cokes, Ángel Delgado, Antonia Eiriz, Carlos Garaicoa, Guerrilla Girls, Gonkar Gytso, Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, Shaun Leonardo, Cannupa Hanska Luger, Armando Mariño, Carlos Martiel, Frank Martínez, Mary Mattingly, Ana Mendieta, Cirenaica Moreira, Michael Rakowitz, Hunter Reynolds and George Lyter, Dread Scott, Tsherin Sherpa, José Ángel Toirac, Betty Tompkins, Chungpo Tsering, José Ángel Vincench, and Jorge Wellesley.

THE 8TH FLOOR

The 8th Floor is an exhibition and events space established in 2010 by Shelley and Donald Rubin, dedicated to promoting cultural and philanthropic initiatives and to expanding artistic and cultural accessibility in New York City.



The 8th Floor is located at 17 West 17th Street and is free and open to the public. School groups are encouraged. Gallery hours are Thursday through Saturday, 11:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. The8thFloor.org



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