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In the social media age we find ourselves in, great ambivalences of relevance reveal themselves daily: one moment our timelines are flooded with impressions of protest, while the next they are filled with plant care videos, recipe posts, or any other content an algorithm has neatly selected for us. In recent years, there has been a surge in protest marches and demonstrations globally¹, voicing demands and making public “memories excluded from national history books and mainstream media audiences” (Doerr 206). During a time when many people take to the streets for reasons as varied as German weather in April, the images of protest seem ubiquitous, yet fleeting. They do not stay – at least not on our social media timelines.

However, as museums all over the globe begin to take an interest in preserving these fleeting moments of protest by collecting, among other things, protest signs during and shortly after demonstrations, they can potentially counteract this ephemerality. This practice of collecting artifacts as history unfolds has come to be known as Rapid Response Collecting (RRC). Developed in recent years and implemented in a growing number of museal institutions, the Smithsonian – a group of museums, libraries, and numerous research centers in the US – is currently at its forefront. In 2015, the Smithsonian founded its own “rapid-response task force” dedicated to collecting traces of history “in real time” (Bowley, “Museums Collect”). By collecting artifacts of protest, museums not only preserve historical moments now, but they also validate the histories told through those objects and allow for the polyphonic realities of (contemporary) history to be heard and made accessible for future scholars, archivists, curators, and the public.

To understand why RRC poses such a powerful tool in breaking with museal traditions and in how far it resists the canon of museal artifacts, we first have to take a glance at the mechanisms and the history of the museum. As a storehouse of the past, a site of knowledge production, cultural authority, and hegemonial structures, the museum shapes the ways in which we think about and see the world. Alongside other public institutions, such as archives and libraries, the museum constructs and forms cultural memory, thus, influencing how societies commemorate the past (Cook 611). Museums, like archives, are “active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed” (Cook and Schwarz 1), ultimately shaping ideas of what is deemed valuable and important within societies (Pearce 89). Museums are neither static nor neutral; they are carefully curated, with each artifact on display and in the archive neatly categorized, labeled, and positioned.

Looking at the history of the museum, we do not have to dig deep to realize that it is a history inextricably linked to discourses of power, imperialism, and colonial exploitation. As colonial powers began to systematically “collect,”² curate, and display material objects from the countries and communities they colonized, they formed and established narratives around those objects that would confirm their own sense of their nation, affirm the supposed natural status of their hegemony, and, thus, the museum came to reflect the status quo of power throughout

1. The year 2020 alone has seen worldwide protest marches on behalf of #BlackLivesMatter, #FridaysforFuture, and anti-vaxxer demands, to name a few (McVeigh).

2. Collecting in a colonial context very often equaled looting or acquiring artifacts under unfair conditions for the economic benefit of the colonizer (Kiwara-Wilson 376).



most of history (MacDonald 85). Through the museum's entanglements in practices of colonialism and imperialism, it has had, and continues to have, an enormous impact on what kinds of histories are voiced, and how those histories are remembered and commemorated today. Since these incomplete and "selective narratives can very easily start to look like definitive histories" (Procter 18), the museum inevitably shapes our sense of historical memory and national identity (Smith 437) and validates our perceptions and narratives of the world. It is therefore crucial to create more diverse and inclusive museum spaces that reflect the heterogeneity of nations and cultures – as opposed to homogenized and essentialized versions – to allow sidelined narratives to eventually enter cultural memory.

Decolonizing the museum demands massive re-thinking and re-structuring and must be understood as an ongoing process. There is no single recipe for decolonizing the museum; rather a range of approaches and methods is needed to arrive at a more equitable state. Since the museum, like the archive, operates through processes of inclusion and exclusion, it has "the power to privilege and to marginalize" (Cook and Schwarz 13). What is often perceived as a tool of hegemony, can as well be used as a tool of resistance by including narratives that would otherwise remain untold. By attempting to collect ephemeral artifacts and stories in immediate response to what appears to be a historically relevant moment now, RRC can potentially help make the museum a more diverse and democratic space. Collecting contemporaneously, then, differs significantly from traditional collecting practices in that it entails "fast, emotional, gut-instinctive decision-making" (Seidler-Ramirez qtd. in Bowley, "Era of Strife"), which ultimately influences what is collected. When the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) established its RRC task force following the social unrest in Baltimore, Maryland, after Freddie Gray's murder in 2015 (Salahu-Din 104), it took precautions to prevent significant historical artifacts, such as #BlackLivesMatter protest signs, from being discarded and lost.

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Collecting, Exhibiting, Contextualizing Artifacts to Preserve History

At the NMAAHC, RRC follows a strategy to "collect artifacts, testimony and footage" (Bowley, "Era of Strife") by gathering donations of protest signs, flyers, posters, buttons, and clothing as well as digital footage such as smartphone recordings either during protests or shortly after. This also emphasizes the museum's importance of donations over purchases (Salahu-Din 105), breaking with traditional museum perceptions of (monetary) value. With their collection on the #BlackLivesMatter

protest movement, the museum ascribes cultural capital and value not only to those objects collected but also to the stories they tell and the values the larger movement stands for, allowing it to become a significant part of the nation's history. Their #BlackLivesMatter collection includes, among other things, various protest signs – either handwritten or mass-produced – a gas mask worn by Dr. Jelani Cobb, several print shirts, and a dark blue

suit and black leather shoes worn by pastor Dr. Jamal Harrison Bryant during a protest in Ferguson after Michael Brown's murder.³ Other examples of RRC include the History Responds initiative that was launched by the New-York Historical Society following the 9/11 attacks ("History Responds"), the collecting of items to record the tragedy of the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida by the Orange County Regional History Center in 2016 (Bowley, "Museums Collect"), or the phenomenon of museums across the globe starting to collect objects that capture the lived realities of the Covid-19 pandemic (Abend). By collecting, exhibiting, and contextualizing those artifacts, museums engage in preserving historical moments and movements now as well as in preventing historical omissions that minority groups are too often subjected to.

RRC thus constitutes an immensely powerful tool in the fight for a more just representation of histories

3. Part of their collection is visually accessible online through the Smithsonian's Open Access at www.si.edu/openaccess.

by creating more inclusive and democratic museum spaces in the present as well as in the future. It has the power to subvert traditional notions of collecting and assigning value to artifacts. Through collecting objects and footage from events that appear to be historically relevant in the respective moment, the (hi)stories of events such as protests are validated and archives for future scholars and curators created. With multiple perspectives recorded, those archives can be researched in the future with a certain historical distance while nevertheless preventing gaps in historical recordings and documentation.

Since “[p]rotest movements are a key function of democracy” (McGarry et al. 15), a democratic museum should naturally also engage with protest movements. Protesters perform their “existence through resistance,” they demand recognition and embody visibility (McGarry et al. 16). Because at the very core of protests lies the attempt to disrupt, incorporating the narratives of protest can in itself be understood as potentially disrupting institutional structures and existing hierarchies. Through entering a museum exhibition and therefore, the recurrent occupation of public (museum) space after having taken up public space in the streets, the leitmotif of the respected movement could be thought of as performing a form of dual protest.

While the initial intention of protest signs is, among other things, to define and progress a movement, collecting, archiving and/or displaying them facilitates defining and shaping the commemoration of a movement in retrospect. Simultaneously, contemporary protest movement exhibitions can challenge the museum’s tale of continuing progress and historical completeness by pointing to the ongoing formation of a movement and its demonstration of the precarious states we live in today. As history museums in particular tend to structure their exhibitions in linear and chronological timelines and, thus, also depict history linearly, they suggest a certain completeness of their exhibitions and of the histories presented, which neglects the effects and ramifications of the past on the present. The recent nature of, for instance, the NMAAHC’s RRC exhibition on #BlackLivesMatter points to the incompleteness of that part of American national history and the ongoing struggle for Black freedom. In doing so, it challenges the conventional

boundaries of temporal museal constructions. By disrupting the chronology and completeness of museum narratives, RRC can make visible the ongoing colonial entanglements of past and present in and outside the museum.

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Yet, as “[a]ll collecting is subjective” (Procter 26), it also must be acknowledged that RRC is neither an exception to that, nor to other mechanisms inherent to the museum, such as the inevitable contextualization of objects and the forming of narratives around them. Although acquired through RRC, artifacts

still go through selection processes before entering a stage of preservation in the archive or display in the exhibition. The collection and curation process of RRC is, of course, one that is still orchestrated by curators. However, by inviting citizens to share their objects and stories, RRC allows active participation of citizens and collaboration with protestors in forming the narratives the museum will tell, thus, breaking with traditional hierarchies of the museum.



During a time of constant performance on digital and social media and with discourses on optical allyship and performative activism increasing, the performance of protest appears to be transforming too. In this light, collecting protest signs allows us not only to preserve historical moments and allow future generations to access those artifacts and histories, but it also enables us to make observations about the changing dynamics of protest. By collecting, curating, and exhibiting objects and stories collected on #BlackLivesMatter protests, RRC can compensate for the impermanent presence of social movements on social media timelines, as well as the ambivalence of relevance inherent to social media. In doing so, RRC provides an additional layer of contextualization that might be missing from posts that consist of only a few words. It constitutes a powerful tool in changing museum mechanisms and hierarchies, thereby contributing to the democratization and decolonization of the museum. Ultimately, RRC can make permanent the acts of rebellion, civil disobedience, and moments in which we stand together – connected.

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