

## **Circulation, impact and the use of Twitter in contemporary museum activism**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper explores the use of Twitter in recent museum-based digital activism. The article contextualises current museum practice in relation to the history of the public museum before exploring the contemporary critical, discursive museum in the context of Post-Fordist forms of New, Network, or Communicative Capitalism. Drawing on the work of theorists such as Dean (2009), Fraser (2000) and Castells (2009), the paper explores the relationship between digital circulation and impact of activist content in museums and galleries, including assessing barriers to effective critical practice using a series of case studies. This article will analyse museum-led initiatives such as #museumsrespondtoFerguson (2014-), activist responses to museum practice such as #kimonowednesdays at Boston Museum of Fine Arts (2015), and museological interventions into wider activist agendas such as #daywithoutimmigrants (2017) and the International Women's March in 2017. Findings suggest there is a need to balance the visibility of social causes through circulation of activist material online with tangible outcomes constituting social impact.

**Keywords:** New Capitalism, Twitter, museums, circulation, impact, network power, mediascape

### **Introduction**

This paper explores the use of Twitter in recent museum-based digital activism, including activist interventions by museum-based practitioners, activist responses to museum practice, and museum interventions into wider activist agendas. The article aims to explore strategies for effective museum activism operating within the power structures of current capitalism and draws on a range of case studies to consider the impact of interventions on cultural narratives, institutional power relations, and cultural policy. Case studies explored

include museum-led initiatives such as *#museumsrespondtoFerguson* (2014-), activist responses to museum practice such as *#kimonowednesdays* at Boston Museum of Fine Arts (2015) and museological interventions into wider activist agendas such as *#daywithoutimmigrants* (2017) and the International Women's March in 2017. These case studies help demonstrate a range of diverse approaches to the use of Twitter and social media within contemporary activist museum practice. Each example shares a multi-faceted, hybrid online-offline approach to action, using the specific *technological affordances* of Twitter as a platform for coordination, circulation and public visibility of content alongside other critical curatorial and museological approaches to ensure interventions surpass mere circulation of content to achieve meaningful socio-cultural impact.

Activist museum practice is first contextualised within the history of museum practice and the socio-cultural history of capitalist power. Focussing on the specific *Post-Fordist* dynamics of *network power* (Castells, 2009) within *New Capitalism* (Sennett, 2005, Fisher, 2010), the paper problematizes the tension between circulation and impact (Dean, 2009) and recognition and redistribution (Fraser, 2000) in digital museum activism that incorporated social media. Drawing on theories that recognise the museum as an increasingly discursive, partial and critical space (Marstine, 2006; Murawska-Muthesius & Piotrowski, 2015; Sandell, 2017), the paper then goes on to explore a range of recent case studies in digital museum activism and analyses the critical impact of these interventions in the contemporary context.

## **Museums, Power and Discourse**

The museum space has long been considered a site of *soft power* in relation to Foucauldian *biopower*<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, as theorists such as Bennett (1995) and Hooper-Greenhill (1992) have highlighted, the public museum developed during the nineteenth century as an intrinsic component of biopower. Early institutions functioned to inculcate audiences with societal ideals through the voice of the curator as an ideological<sup>2</sup> 'power-broker' (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994, p. 47) performatively validated by the cultural authority of the museum institution<sup>3</sup>. This museological power historically operated through a one-to-many flow of information, from curator to audience, who in turn internalise cultural norms and ideals and carry these forward into civic life (Bennett, 1995). However, more recently, museum practice has shifted towards what Marstine terms the *post-museum* (2006). Unlike the traditional museum, the post-museum is defined by participation and dialogue with audiences. Here, diverse publics take an active role in cultural meaning-making and museum practitioners function as facilitators within this process (Marstine, 2006, p.19). Museum practitioners in the post-museum may be curatorial staff, or otherwise might be members of broader educational, outreach, digital, archival or conservation-based teams.

An interesting facet of this shift towards the discursive post-museum is an increasing institutional and theoretical recognition of museums as fundamentally partial and political entities capable of actively contributing to social change, rather than neutral institutions displaying objective historical and cultural narratives. As Sandell states: 'there has been a

growing interest in the potential for museums to function as agents of social change, deploying their collections and other resources to contribute, in varied ways, to a more just and equitable society' (2007, p. 5). Recent years have seen the development of specialist museums dedicated to questions of human rights, equality and social justice (Carter, 2015)<sup>4</sup>, as well as an increase in activist exhibitions and programmes of events<sup>5</sup> and theoretical interventions exploring the museum as a site for activism (Sandell, 2007; 2017; Message, 2014; 2019). Digital campaigns on social media have also focussed increasingly on the inherently political and partial nature of the museum. For instance, #Museumsarenotneutral, an ongoing initiative first developed in 2017 by museum educator Murawski and PhD candidate Autry, which aimed to spread awareness of the potential for museums to be 'relevant, socially-engaged spaces in our communities, acting as agents of positive change' (2017, para. 9).<sup>6</sup>

These critical museological forms are also linked to what Murawska-Muthesius and Piotrowski call the *museum-as-forum*: An institution that self-reflexively reveals the relationship between museum narratives and *hegemonic*<sup>7</sup> power while democratically granting 'space and voice to minorities and social critics' (2015, p. 7). However, it is important to recognise that this shift towards a more collaborative, discursive version of the museum operates within a broader socio-cultural context framed by current capitalism. Just as the traditional version of the public museum operated to reflect and inform early biopower, so the current discursive and interactive museum reflects power structures in contemporary society (Reynolds, 2017).

When considering contemporary power structures, it is imperative to discuss the Post-Fordist capitalist society, which has been described variously as *New Capitalism* (Fisher, 2010, Sennett, 2006), *Network Society* (Castells, 1996, 2007, 2009) and *Communicative Capitalism* (Dean, 2009).<sup>8</sup> Though individual, these theories share the core concept that contemporary capitalist power, aided by digital networks, now takes a horizontal, decentralised form based in collaboration and active participation with citizens (Sennett, 2009, p. 29). Operating in reality as a saturated version of biopower (Fisher, 2011, p. 6), this form of capitalism brings with it its own nuances of hegemonic power and control. As described in detail below, this has important repercussions for the efficacy of contemporary activist museum strategies and practices.

Of particular relevance here is the theory of network power as expounded by Castells (2007, 2009). For Castells, contemporary society is structured through the logic of global digital networks. In this dynamic of power there are two basic mechanisms: The *programmer* and the *switcher*. Programmers are societal actors or groups who have the ability to create networks and set the hegemonic narratives within them, which are then discursively mediated and circulated by members of the public (Castells, 2009, p.46). Meanwhile, switchers facilitate the 'cooperation of different networks by sharing common goals and combining resources, while fending off competition from other networks by setting up strategic cooperation' (Castells, 2009, p. 45). For Castells, networks operate through a 'binary logic: inclusion/exclusion' (2009, p. 20) meaning that once programmes

are in place they must be followed by network members. However, there is resistance in the network society in the form of counterpower, which 'is achieved through the same two mechanisms that constitute power in the network society: the programs of the networks and the switches between networks' (2009, p.4 7). The nature of networked counterpower will be a focus of explorations below, as it corresponds to digital museum activism.

### **Effective Critique in New Capitalism**

New Capitalism brings with it fresh challenges associated with effective critique, defined here as critical activity capable of challenging social, cultural, political or economic injustice stemming from the dominant system of power. For theorists such as Rancière (1999), early forms of capitalist society actively marginalised and excluded ideals and subjectivities which ran counter to social norms. However, in so doing they provided the opportunity for invisible, marginalised groups to intervene onto society's political stage, performing new cultural narratives and challenging societal inequalities through a process of 'dissensus' (Rancière, 1999, p. 124). In contrast, current capitalism is understood to function under a dynamic of absolute visibility, where all members of society are awarded a name and a place. Within this total visibility, inequality still very much exists. However, for Rancière the partition between included visible subjects and excluded invisible subjects has been eliminated and replaced by 'a continuum of hierarchical positions starting at the top and going all the way to the bottom, mimicking basic school grading' (Rancière, 1999, p. 116). This structurally eradicates the potential for oppressed subjects and non-consensual ideas to appear on the political stage. As Rancière states, there is a 'presupposition of the inclusion of all parties and their problems that prohibits the political subjectification of a part of those who have no part, of a count of the uncounted' (1999, p. 116). Indeed, attempts to perform dissensus within current capitalism often simply act to inform and deepen the saturated hierarchy of monitored and managed identities within society, and add to the strength and versatility of current power in relation to this.

The work of Fraser further explicates barriers to effective critique within New Capitalism. For Fraser (2000), there is a general rhetoric of inclusivity and tolerance within recent capitalist society which enables once marginalised subjectivities to be visible and to have a voice. However, as Fraser argues, this inclusive discourse often operates on a purely cultural level and therefore does not lead to real societal, cultural or economic change. Marginalised subjects might be visible and tolerated, but they remain structurally marginalised societal identities. For Fraser, cultural recognition of marginalised groups must occur alongside economic redistribution in order for critique to be effective (2000). Without this dual activity, the cultural superstructure of society alters without affecting its neoliberal economic base, which remains structurally reliant on inequality. Fraser does believe that a politics of recognition 'is politically useful and indeed morally required' (2000, p.23). However, that recognition must be employed critically as a way to deinstitutionalise value hierarchies and must operate in combination with strategies of redistribution: 'aiming to replace neoliberal economics with democratic socialism or social democracy' (2000, p.22).

Fraser's ideas are extended in relation to the digital through Dean's (2008; 2009) theories of Communicative Capitalism. Dean also highlights current capitalism's desire to recognise and tolerate diverse beliefs, values and identities, but explores this tendency as something which is fundamentally underwritten through digital networks. In Dean's terms, digital networks facilitate public visibility for a diverse range of voices, identities and subjectivities, including marginal and resistant voices (2008; 2009)<sup>9</sup>. However, as Dean states, online content is commonly circulated in isolation from the complex social reality within which it operates (2008; 2009). For Dean, this tendency unwittingly depoliticises potentially radical statements, meaning that 'real antagonism or dissent is foreclosed' (2008, p. 106). Without careful contextualisation, resistant perspectives become mere 'contributions to circulating content - not actions to elicit responses' (2008, p. 107). As Dean asserts:

Specific or singular acts of resistance, statements of opinion, or instances of transgression are not political in and of themselves. Rather they have to be politicised, that is articulated together with other struggles, resistances and ideals in the course or context of opposition to a shared enemy or opponent. (2009, p.106)

Interventions must be framed tactically and self-reflexively, linking social, cultural and economic causes to societal injustices and inequalities. Without this, critical perspectives will simply be assimilated into the cultural rhetoric of New Capitalism without creating tangible societal change.

This dynamic of visibility, consensus, rhetorical recognition and decontextualized circulation creates a substantial challenge to effective critique in current society. Communicative capitalism, network power and the associated dynamics of counterpower offer unprecedented opportunities for diverse groups and members of the public to gain recognition of activist causes through the use of digital platforms. This is something of particular relevance in the context of the New Museum or critical museum-as-forum, which fundamentally foreground dialogue and public engagement in the development of cultural and museological narratives. However, under the terms of theorists such as Fraser and Dean, interventions must do more than circulate in informational networks online or onsite. Critical curatorial interventions must operate to frame activist content in their wider context and seek to facilitate socio-economic and cultural redistribution as well as recognition, i.e., disrupting hegemonic narratives and rewriting cultural meanings as well as circulating content. Interventions must therefore be situated extremely carefully and critically in order to be considered effective.

With this identification in mind, the next part of this paper will explore a range of case studies and examples of digital museum-based activism using Twitter, considering the relationship between recognition and re-distribution, circulation and impact concerning cultural narratives, institutional power relations and cultural policy. Operating within the

power dynamics of current capitalism, the success of these case studies depends on the strategic way they intervene in dominant cultural discourse, particularly in terms of balancing the circulation of critical rhetoric with the generation of traceable socio-cultural impact.

### **Case Studies – Museum-Led Activism: #museumsrespondtoFerguson**

#museumsrespondtoFerguson was developed in response to the killing of unarmed African American teenager Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in August, 2014. Anger surrounding Brown's death was exacerbated by the refusal of a grand jury to indict the police officers responsible, leading to widespread local and national protests. The incident was considered symbolic of both historic state-sanctioned racial violence and contemporary brutality towards Black men by police forces in the U.S..

#museumsrespondtoFerguson grew out of a dissatisfaction with the amount of attention paid to Ferguson by museums both on and offline (Jennings, 2015, p. 99). The movement was co-founded by academics and curators including Gretchen Jennings, Adrienne Russell and Aleia Brown. The #museumsrespondtoFerguson hashtag was first used by Jennings on the 25<sup>th</sup> November 2014 as a way to help aggregate online content related to the events at Ferguson and state sanctioned violence more generally. At this time, in solidarity with Sam Black, President of the Association of African American Museums (AAAM) who posted a statement on the AAAM website offering sympathies to the families of unarmed black men killed by the police, Jennings also co-developed a joint statement with representatives from twelve other museums across the US.

The joint statement was shared on Twitter and published on a range of other social media sites and blogs on the 11<sup>th</sup> December 2014 as well being published in the October 2015 issue of *Museums and Social Issues*. The statement was a call to action for museums, asking institutions to actively take a position on matters of social justice and to 'commit to identifying how they can connect to relevant contemporary issues irrespective of collection, focus, or mission...' (Jennings, 2015, p. 102). Museum practitioners were also asked to consider ways they could practically challenge racial inequality both within institutions and in the wider community. Suggested approaches included working towards more equal hiring strategies for museum staff, offering museum space for civic events, creating partnerships with organisations committed to fighting racism, sharing the joint statement and contributing to the #museumsrespondtoFerguson hashtag on Twitter. The statement also signposted readers to other related initiatives, including the #Fergusonsyllabus Twitter campaign initiated by Marcia Chatelain, an Assistant Professor of History at Georgetown College. This campaign aimed to share practical ideas for implementing teaching around the events at Ferguson into classrooms. This initiative was then itself shared and developed for the museum community by Mike Murawaski, a museum educator and lead for the digital community *ArtMuseumTeaching.com*, who also co-led the 2017 #museumsarenotneutral campaign as mentioned above.

The joint statement was re-published by the national American Association of State and Local History and the regional New England Museums Association, and led to growing online interest and discussion, particularly on Twitter (Jennings, 2015, p.100). As a result of this, blogger Adrienne Russell and PhD candidate Aleia Brown, both contributors to the joint statement, convened a monthly Twitter chat that first took place on the 17<sup>th</sup> December 2014. The chat aimed to develop a discussion forum considering the role museums should play in relation both to the events at Ferguson and broader questions of race and equality in contemporary cultural spaces.

However, the organisers of the hashtag also fundamentally aimed for this online discussion to facilitate practical change. As Carvill Schellenbacher states: 'beginning the conversation was important, but [Russell & Brown] are clear it should go beyond that, that the monthly Twitter meeting should be more than a learning experience, that it should challenge people to act' (2019, e-book sect. #museumsrespondtoferguson). Indeed, the monthly meetings not only facilitated discussion, but also meant sharing examples of good practice in terms of exhibition-making, programmes and policies (Fletcher, 2016). Furthermore, Aleia Brown and Adrienne Russell went on to undertake offline consultation and collaboration at museums and cultural organisations in the US, including a 2015 workshop for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Centre's initiative 'CrossLines': A Culture Lab on intersectionality (Fletcher, 2016).

#museumsrespondtoFerguson also generated a second hashtag and associated network: #MuseumWorkersSpeak. This hashtag focuses more specifically on questions of equality in museum practice such as fair payment of workers, diversity in staffing, and the need to break down barriers to access and participation (Carvill Schellenbacher, 2019). This hashtag resulted in scheduled Twitter chats, but also a more formal presence with a dedicated website and Facebook page, as well as geographic subgroups organising offline meetups in cities including Washington DC and Chicago. The group began their offline organising with a guerrilla session at the 2015 AAAM conference exploring museums and labour rights; returning a year later with an officially scheduled session at the next annual event (Carvill Schellenbacher, 2019).

The #museumsrespondtoFerguson initiative uses the circulatory power of social media to raise awareness of social and cultural questions related to critical museum practice. However, it also generates offline networks which operate outside the digital realm and intervenes into the museum space both physically and discursively, aiming to find practical, impactful and meaningful ways to challenge and rework dominant museum practice towards social justice and equality. Taken in its broader context to include the joint statement and #MuseumWorkersSpeak, as well as solidarity and connection with wider broader interventions such as #Fergusonsyllabus, it is also significant that #museumsrespondtoFerguson connects social, cultural and economic inequalities both historically and in the present, and considers the role of the museum in challenging racial inequality from a range of perspectives, including partnering with civic organisations, diversifying the museum workforce and fighting for equal pay.

In this way, the movement approaches the concerns of theorists such as Dean and Fraser by contextualising the digital circulation of activist content and connecting critical concerns with the need for practical, tangible socio-economic change. The movement also operates highly effectively in relation to network counterpower as described by Castells, particularly in terms of the role of the switcher. By linking the circulatory potential of social media sites such as Twitter with powerful cultural networks such as national museum associations, conferences and traditional academic journals, the movement strategically links with other powerful and recognised cultural networks within society. This amplifies the campaign's credibility and increases its chances of effecting real change in cultural narratives and institutional value hierarchies. To operate effectively, the movement critically employs the specific technological affordances of Twitter, such as its hashtag and ability to reach across a wide segment of publics, as a platform for collaboration, organisation and circulation of content alongside a range of other communicative modes both online and offline. This helps to ensure that critical voices are both visible and capable of impacting on hegemonic cultural programmes in society.

### **Activist Publics in the Museum Space: #KimonoWednesdays and 'Decolonise Our Museum'**

Kimono Wednesdays was a June 2015 initiative accompanying the exhibition of Monet's painting 'La Japonaise' (1876) at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. This painting depicts Monet's wife wearing a blonde wig and a red kimono, holding a fan and looking over her shoulder coquettishly. The image is indicative of a preoccupation with Orientalism and a fetishism of the East in 19<sup>th</sup> century France. Indeed, as Liu Carriger states: 'the painting reflects the height of *Japonisme*<sup>10</sup> in nineteenth-century France, so excessively that some critics claim it was meant as a parody of the French obsession with Japan' (2018, p.165).

As part of its audience engagement programme for the MFA Summer Programme, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts invited members of the public to try on a Kimono in the gallery space and share the resulting images on Twitter and other social media using the hashtag #MFABoston (Rodney, 2015). The event was intended to run every Wednesday night from the 24<sup>th</sup> of June to the 29<sup>th</sup> of July 2015 under the title 'Kimono Wednesdays' (Valk, 2015, p. 380). According to the MFA's Deputy Director Katie Getchell: 'the idea was to give visitors a 'tactile experience' with the kimonos made in Japan 'to understand and experience the painting in a new way'' (Quackenbush, 2015, para.5). However, for some visitors the experience amounted to cultural appropriation: Exoticising the non-western and uncritically applauding historic Orientalist practices. This eventually led to protest within the physical exhibition space (Valk, 2015; Liu Carriger, 2018). On the first evening of Kimono Wednesdays which included a short talk entitled 'Claude Monet: Flirting with the Exotic', three protestors joined members of the public trying on the replica outfit, holding handwritten protest signs that highlighted the racial imperialism of the event. Over the coming weeks, the number of protestors increased slowly, eventually reaching around 20

(Liu Carriger, 2018, p.165). Signs held a range of related messages such as ‘Try on the kimono, learn what it’s like to be a racist imperialist!!! Today!!!’ and “This is racism. This is appropriation. This is orientalism” (Valk, 2015, p.380-1). Protestors first operated as ‘Stand against Yellowface’, later changing the name of their campaign to ‘Decolonise Our Museums’.

Interventions in the physical space of the gallery were reflected and significantly amplified in online commentaries on social media sites including Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter, which were ‘flooded with messages denouncing the allegedly racist event’ (Valk, 2015, p. 380). In this way, the gallery’s intended viral dissemination of Kimono Wednesdays through institutional social media handles and hashtags was used against itself and subverted by activist voices. Critics also used hashtags such as #MFABoston and #kimonowednesdays in conjunction with other related activist campaigns and their hashtags. On Twitter, connected campaigns included #decoloniseOM, the hashtag associated with Decolonise Our Museums, #WhoSpeaks, a broader, ongoing activist campaign aiming to address the daily pressures faced by women in a range of cultural arenas, and other contemporary hashtags such as #whitesupremacykills. This latter hashtag was at this time being used ‘in conjunction with the Charleston shooting (one week earlier, 17 June 2015), in which a twenty-year-old white supremacist named Dylann Roof carried out a mass shooting, murdering nine Black people inside a church in South Carolina’ (Liu Carriger, 2018, p. 173). This connectivity between hashtags increased visibility of the campaign and again helped create a network of solidarity and counterpower between sympathetic voices.

Not all responses to Kimono Wednesdays were critical however. In fact, a counter-protest to the original intervention took place both online and offline. Within the gallery space, counter-protestors wore kimonos and held signs asserting that they were not offended by the exhibit. These images were also widely shared and discussed online on Twitter using the hashtag #KimonoWednesdays, on personal blogs and via social media platforms including Facebook and Instagram<sup>11</sup>. Discussion around the various campaigns intensified, and the story was picked up and shared by large international media outlets including the BBC, Huffington Post, the Japan Times and CBS, as well as local and regional news sources such as the *Boston Globe*.

Initially, the then-Director of the MFA Boston Malcolm Rogers commented on the Kimono Wednesday’s action, stating that ‘a little controversy never did any harm’ (Valk, 2015 p. 382). However, perhaps as a result of intensifying pressure, the MFA issued an online apology in July 2015, and agreed to alter the format of Kimono Wednesdays so that the replica kimono was available to touch but not to wear. New talks by MFA educators were also scheduled to take place every Wednesday throughout July offering context and historical background both to the painting and the wider influence of Japonisme (MFA News, 2015). Later, in February 2016, the museum organised and hosted a two-hour conference entitled ‘Kimono Wednesdays: A Conversation’ and made a recording of this event which remains publicly available on YouTube. This event invited academics Reiko

Tomii, Ryan Wong and Barbara Lewisand, as well as Xtina Huilan Wang, an activist from the Decolonise Our Museum campaign, to discuss Kimono Wednesdays as a panel.

The conference was positioned as an opportunity for institutional learning by the MFA, and as a moment of public collaboration with the activists who had campaigned against the museum (Gilbert, 2016). The event opened with an ‘acknowledgement and apology’ from the new Museum of Fine Arts Director Matthew Teitelbaum, who also participated in a Q&A as part of the event. Meanwhile, the MFA’s curator of lectures, courses, and concerts Jasmine Hagans stated that the MFA acknowledged it had fallen short of its standards, and that the museum must address the cultural inequality often embedded in historic collections and their narratives (Cook, 2016). Speaking on behalf of the MFA, Hagans said: ‘We are sorry that we let you down. We apologize for the lack of context and content’ and asked ‘what should the MFA do and learn so that we don’t repeat the mistakes of “Kimono Wednesdays”?’ (Cook, 2016, para. 6).

Where #museumsrespondtoFerguson is drawn from radical curatorial practice, the intervention into Kimono Wednesdays stems from a multi-faceted public response to institutional activities. This intervention was instituted initially by physical protest by activists within the gallery space but expanded substantially through digital circulation on social media and associated discussion. The viral nature of the intervention was also facilitated by the initial framing of Kimono Wednesdays by the MFA as an initiative to be shared on social media using the #MFABoston hashtag. The online social media presence of the initiative might have unwittingly encouraged critical discussion of the event online, while providing a channel for activists to hijack and use it to their own ends.

Like #museumsrespondtoFerguson, the power of this intervention was fostered partly through the development of public visibility through online social media circulation and the linking of activism related to Kimono Wednesdays with other grassroots campaigns. However, this visibility was augmented and rendered more culturally powerful through the uptake of the story by national and international news publishing organisations, i.e., hegemonic media communications networks operating here as network switchers, to use Castells’ terms (2009). This combination of public visibility and appropriation by powerful networks seemingly helped compel the MFA Boston to take action, and in so doing ultimately elevated the Kimono Wednesdays campaign beyond the mere circulation of activist content. In this case, this led to a tangible change in institutional programming, a formal apology from senior museum management and an event dedicated to improving institutional policy surrounding the display of marginal cultural histories in future curatorial practice.

In this case then, a strategic mixture of online and offline activity by just three original protestors can be understood to have led to the successful challenging of societal value hierarchies as disseminated and perpetuated by a powerful hegemonic cultural institution. Effective intervention is characterised here by a multi-layered process where numerous actors collaborate and communicate using a range of tactics and platforms, rather than operating in an isolated or single-faceted way.

## **Exhibition-Making and Social Media as Part of Wider Protest: #daywithoutimmigrants and #Art-less**

A third example of effective digital cultural activism can be seen through the #Art-Less exhibition by Davis Museum at Wellesley College, developed as part of #daywithoutimmigrants, a wider coordinated day of action in 2017. The hashtag #daywithoutimmigrants was a response to Donald Trump's policies on immigration, and in particular the Executive Order signed on January 27<sup>th</sup> 2017, which came to be known as the 'travel ban'. As Johnson states: this order, 'temporarily suspended...all refugee admissions; and...admissions from seven predominantly Muslim nations (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Sudan, and Yemen)' (2017, p. 630). As Pierce and Meissner assert, the proposed ban led to 'widespread international and domestic criticism and was the subject of dozens of legal challenges' (2017, p.1). The initial version of Trump's ban was blocked nationwide on February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017 (Wolf, 2018)<sup>12</sup> However, continuing appeals by the Trump administration to reinstate a version of the ban led to increasing domestic and international tension surrounding the immigration policies of the Trump administration and protests in the US and abroad.

A coordinated national intervention, #daywithoutimmigrants was created on social media without any central organising institution or body (Robbins & Correal, 2017). The campaign urged immigrants, workers and students alike across the U.S. to go on strike and boycott the purchase of goods on February 16<sup>th</sup> 2017. Through this means, it aimed to make visible the cultural and economic value of migrants to the U.S. Action was documented in 39 states across America, with thousands of people marching in protest, hundreds of businesses, shops and restaurants closing in solidarity with the action, and in some schools as many as 30% of pupils staying at home from classes on the day of action (USA Today, 2017)<sup>13</sup>

#Art-Less was an act of cultural solidarity with wider activities of #daywithoutimmigrants initiated by the Davis Museum at Wellesley College. This intervention began on February 16<sup>th</sup> and ran until February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017, coinciding purposefully with the President's Day weekend (Cascone, 2017). According to the museum's press release, the event aimed to 'demonstrate the critical role that immigrants to the United States have played in the arts, both in their creative contributions as well as their stewardship of the visual arts' (Davis Art Museum, 2017a, para.1). To demonstrate this, the museum either de-installed or covered 'all works of art in its permanent collections galleries that were either created by or given to Wellesley's art collection by immigrants to the United States' (Davis Art Museum, 2017a, para. 2). Work removed included paintings by renowned artists such as Agnes Martin, a stately portrait of George Washington by Swedish-born Adolf Ulrik Wertmüller and much of the African collection at the museum, which was donated by the Polish Klejman family (Wellesley College, 2017). In all, around 120 works of art, or 20% of the permanent collections on display at the gallery were removed from sight and replaced with labels stating works had been made or donated by an immigrant (Strunk,

2017). Labels were also made available for download by other institutions on the organisational website (Cain, 2017).

#Art-Less was publicised on the Davis Museum website and social media channels including Instagram and Twitter. The exhibition increased its publicity by using the hashtag #artless alongside #daywithoutimmigrants (itself trending on Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> February on Twitter; USA Today, 2017). The exhibition was also picked up and tweeted by major press outlets, with media providers including *CNN*, *RT*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times*, as well as specialist arts blogs and sites such as Artsy and Art News writing articles on the intervention.<sup>14</sup>

Where #museumsrespondtoFerguson and #kimonowednesdays function as digital campaigns specifically interrogating museum practice through activism, #artless is a more outward-facing creative adjunct to the wider #daywithoutimmigrants movement. Solidarity here takes the form of an exhibition devised to creatively support and critically perform the aims of the broader campaign, which was to focus on demonstrating the cultural value of immigration, rather than the economic value. Digital circulation was central to the development and organisation of the wider #daywithoutimmigrants campaign, and was used to frame and publicise the #Art-Less exhibition at Davis Art Museum. This operated through the use of the hashtag in the exhibition title and the direct linkage of the Davis intervention to #daywithoutimmigrants as a 'born-digital' campaign.

The technological affordances of Twitter as a tool for digital circulation, solidarity and organisation (Gerbaudo, 2012) were central to #daywithoutimmigrants as a multi-faceted and geographically dispersed intervention, allowing disparate elements of the campaign to be brought together in a single digital space, from strike action and boycotts to marches and the #artless exhibition. This unified picture of dispersed action circulating on social media, connected with national and international news coverage, helped create a significant network of communicative counter-power denouncing anti-immigration rhetoric. This kind of rhetoric should not be underestimated in an era of network power and within a country operating under the governance of Donald Trump as the first 'Twitter President' (Ott & Dickinson, 2019). Crucially, however, this intervention also operated to create action which, through strikes, boycotts, and cultural interventions such as the #artless exhibition, linked rhetorical counterpower with real socio-economic and cultural impact. In this way, #daywithoutimmigrants moved beyond a recognition of the injustice of Trump's Executive Order to connect with socio-economic and cultural redistribution, at least for the duration of the campaign.

## **The Creation of Activist Archives through Twitter: The Women's March Collections**

Another impactful use of Twitter by museums and galleries can be seen in the collection of signs from marches and other protests. A recent example can be seen in the International

Women's March that took place on January 21<sup>st</sup> 2017 to protest Donald Trump's presidency and his personal conduct toward women.

The 2017 Women's March is considered likely to have been the 'largest single-day demonstration in recorded U.S. history' (Chenoweth & Pressman, 2017, para.1). As Ross and Maddrell state: 'it was estimated that over a million people filled the streets of Washington - two to three times as many marchers than the inauguration the day before' (2017, p. 613). At least another 653 national marches took place in cities including Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York (Chenoweth & Pressman, 2017). There were also very significant numbers of protestors internationally, with 198 marches taking place in 84 countries (Schmidt & Almkhatar, 2017) taking the total estimate to between 3.3 and 4.6 million protestors globally (Waddell, 2017). The march was organised around principles of inclusion and intersectionality open to all women and all sympathisers, and was framed with reference to a 'triad of gender, race, and economic justice' (Ross & Maddrell, 2017, p. 614).

Social media played a fundamental role in the organisation and coverage of the Women's March, something Kitch sees as the creation of a *living archive* (2017). By the end of the day of protest, the Women's March had been mentioned over 7 million times on social media (Garrison, 2017), including 600,000 uses of the hashtags #womensmarch and #womensmarch2017 (Kitch, 2017, p. 124). Fittingly, given the emphasis on solidarity and intersectionality in the organisation of the march, multiple hashtags were used that linked online campaigns such as #BlackLivesMatter and #weareallimmigrants with the Women's March. This overlapping was also reflected in physical signage used on the ground (Twitter, 2017). The march made the front page of many national newspapers including the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Washington Post* (Hoover, 2017) and was covered by major press outlets internationally, not least due to the global nature of the protests.

In response to the protests, museums and galleries, including the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, University of Southern California Special Collections, Chicago's Newberry Library, Maine State Library, Boston Public Library, University of North Carolina Library, Art Gallery of Guelph and the Bishopsgate Institute in the UK, sent institutional tweets to alert people that they were physically at the protest collecting signs for accession to institutional archives. Protestors on the ground also used Twitter to help spread the word for collecting institutions including Denver Library, the State Library in Indianapolis, Women's Archives in Iowa and Michigan State University Museum (Ryan, 2017, Brooks, 2017).

This activity led to the archiving and display of a selection of signs by various institutions. The New York Historical Society staged a dedicated exhibition entitled 'Collecting the Women's Marches' which opened the day before the second annual Women's March on January 19<sup>th</sup> 2018 and ran until September 30<sup>th</sup> of the same year (New York Historical Society, 2018). Meanwhile, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History accessioned 50 signs and posters from the 2017 march into its collection, and displayed 'a hand-written Black Lives Matter poster in the museum's 'American Democracy' exhibit' (Aggeler, 2018, para.10). Both institutions also confirmed that their staff attended

the 2018 Women's March with a view to collecting further material (Aggeler, 2018; Cascone, 2018). The New York Historical Society's director Margi Hofer asserted that her institution would be focussing on 'material that reflected changes over the past year, such as signs referencing #MeToo and #TimesUp, or the 'Power to the Polls' movement in the run-up to midterm elections' (Cascone, 2018, para.3).

The response to the Women's March by museums and galleries here shows how cultural institutions can not only show solidarity with activist campaigns and increase public visibility around them, but can also collaborate with activist movements in culturally significant ways. In this case, by accessioning signage from the Women's March campaign, cultural institutions can convert potentially transient and ephemeral moments of protest and circulating content into lasting cultural interventions that permanently alter institutional cultural narratives. Here, the particular technological affordances of Twitter as a mechanism for coordination, circulation and public visibility of content are put to work both strategically and curatorially to raise awareness of a collecting strategy and museum presence at protests, allowing the process of archiving to take place. Like the other examples of digital museum activism above then, we see again the tactical use of Twitter to effect ends that surpass mere digital circulation. Instead, these museums and galleries used the visibility of social media to lead to interventions capable of impacting hegemonic cultural narratives in an ongoing and tangible way.

## **Conclusion**

This article, in its discussion of various case studies focused on museum-based social media activism, has demonstrated a range of different uses of Twitter and social media. Examples span activist interventions by museum-based practitioners, public protest within cultural institutions, and the use of activism by museums to support wider initiatives. However, in each case, activist interventions draw on a range of communicative forms, each with their own technological affordances, to effect meaningful change within the auspices of network power and New Capitalism. What is clear is that the use of Twitter and social media more generally never functions within a vacuum. Rather, these technologies act as tools within a complex online-offline hybrid mediascape (Sandell, 2017), of which museums, media sources and social media channels, and handwritten protest signs are all a part.

As the case studies have shown, Twitter effectively contributes to circulation and coordination as well as solidarity between movements in the creation of publicly visible and substantial networks of counterpower. The open accessibility of the Twitter platform is fundamental to this endeavour as an affordance that facilitates public visibility for diverse voices, offering the opportunity to cut through traditional institutional and societal hierarchies of communication. The structural design of Twitter offers equal visibility to individuals and powerful institutions and entities, at least in theory. This is a phenomenon amply demonstrated in the examples above, where activist interventions are driven variously by members of the public, museum educators, bloggers, PhD candidates, traditional news media outlets, and museum directors. Nevertheless, the ideological

gravitas of traditional news media networks and cultural institutions retains an essential structural role in effective socio-cultural, political or economic critique, functioning alongside new media visibility to help generate credibility for activist narratives and access to hegemonic communications networks within New Capitalism, and acting as an important switcher for grassroots initiatives in this way. Like previous curatorial activities, this can be understood as a performative process where the established, conventional authority of powerful institutions facilitates effective cultural communication. Indeed, as Sandell has inferred, the discursive New Museum holds a particularly powerful societal position in this sense. As a partial, politically discursive cultural space that remains imbued with a sense of cultural authenticity, the New Museum maintains ‘a relatively privileged, authoritative and potentially influential position in the media hierarchy’ (2017, p.174).

It is through critical, self-reflexive and tactical use of various media online and offline that effective critique can be instituted, reaching beyond the rhetorical recognition of injustice towards a tangible alteration of institutional policy, socio-economic inequality, or hegemonic cultural narrative. A focus on impact as well as circulation and recognition, and on redistribution is certainly essential within New Capitalism. However, in a world of network power and communicative capitalism, the rhetorical programming of communication networks both online and offline is also seemingly of significant consequence. Indeed, at a time when right-wing populism is on the rise internationally, it may be that the urgency of creating and circulating communicative networks of progressive counterpower is dramatically increased. What is clear is that tactical approaches to critical intervention are imperative in any setting, and that future interventions must seek to operate self-reflexively and critically in relation to the vicissitudes of contemporary power they confront.

### **Biographical notes:**

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Biopower is a term coined by Foucault (1976) to refer to the mechanics of soft power in democratic societies. Here, civil obedience is fostered principally through social and institutional discipline, surveillance and the threat of punishment and social exile, rather than physical harm, which abounded in previous monarchic systems of rule. A key characteristic of biopower is that it is initially imposed from the outside, but becomes embodied, learnt and performed by the subject in order to function effectively. This form of power can also be defined as soft power.

<sup>2</sup> The term ideology is defined here as a group of culturally specific, normative values held as part of a hegemonic power structure in society (see footnote 8).

<sup>3</sup> We can understand the curatorial power mentioned here as an example of performativity (Austin, 1975; Butler, 1990) in that the power to create dominant cultural narratives is dependent on a particular conventional and authoritative societal role and setting: here, the museum itself.

<sup>4</sup> Museums include the Canadian Museum for Human Rights founded 2008 in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Museum of Homelessness, opened in 2016 in London UK and Migration Museum, founded 2017 in London UK.

<sup>5</sup> Examples include: 'Disobedient Objects' at the V&A Museum, which explored the history of creative activism, London, UK (2014), 'From Hope to Nope: Graphics and Politics 2008-2018' at the Design Museum (2018) which showcased activist graphics and led to a counter-exhibition of artists'

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work after an arms company was hosted at the Design Museum during the exhibition; and Not an Alternative's pop-up 'Natural History Museum' (2014); a US project which sought to educate the public on the use of Fossil Fuels and highlighted the problematic corporate funding of museum spaces.

<sup>6</sup> This campaign operated by generating conversation around the political potential of museums on Twitter and printing t-shirts bearing the #Museumsarenotneutral hashtag.

<sup>7</sup> The term hegemony is used in this paper with reference to Gramsci's theories of cultural hegemony, which describing ways ruling classes maintain societal power through dominant ideologies, often instantiated and mediated through cultural institutions (1971)

<sup>8</sup> A paradigm shift of power from Fordist to Post-Fordist Capitalism, also known as New or Networked Capitalism, began in the 1970s and came to fruition around the 1990s (Castells, 1996; Sennett, 2006). Theories of New and Networked Capitalism depart from the shared recognition that capitalist power from the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century onwards is structurally distinct from the way industrial, Fordist Capitalism functioned during the nineteenth century. Where Industrial Capitalism was based around a rigid, pyramid-like structure of centralised and hierarchised rule (Weber, 1905), New or Post-Fordist Capitalism is understood to function around a digitally aided, decentralised, networked structure (Castells, 2009, 23). Dean's theories of Communicative Capitalism (2009) relate in particular to the increasingly digitally mature Post-Fordist society we now inhabit and the circulation of content via social networks.

<sup>9</sup> Dean's argument here critiques the potential for left-wing, progressive intervention through online activism, a focus reflected in this article more broadly. However, it is important to recognise the equivalent use of Twitter and other social media outlets in the generation and circulation of right-wing commentaries, and the complex societal repercussions of this, particularly given the current rise of right-wing populism in the West.

<sup>10</sup> A French term coined in the nineteenth century to describe the cultural trend of incorporating Japanese iconography into European art. Related to broader trends in Orientalism, itself critiqued by cultural theorists including Edward Said and Linda Nochlin for its fetishisation and frequent sexualisation of non-western cultures.

<sup>11</sup> Examples include Keiko Kawabe's blog *Japanese American in Boston* which covered the MFA counter-protests and shared invitations for counter-protestors to join these interventions (2015) and *Kimono Seikatsu*, a 'multifaceted kimono organization of based out of Boston, Massachusetts' (2016) which includes blogs from counter-protestors at the MFA, as well as information and hire of kimonos.

<sup>12</sup> Trump's bill would go through numerous incarnations over the following months and years, finally being passed in a revised form on June 26<sup>th</sup> 2018 (Wolf, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> *USA Today* offered a particularly detailed collated report of the activities on the day, documenting interventions in 35 states. According to this 2017 article, activities included more than 60 businesses closing for the day in Alabama, around a third of students from Phoenix, Arizona schools, and a quarter of pupils from Springdale, Arkansas schools staying home from class. In Atlanta, Georgia there were protests outside the Immigration Offices, while in Indianapolis families attended a 3.5-mile protest march to the Indiana State House and in Baltimore hundreds of people joined a march in Patterson Park. Meanwhile, in Des Moines, Iowa around 2,500 people marched to the Iowa Capital, and around 70 Latino businesses closed in solidarity with the campaign. In other areas, such as Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan and Louisiana government officials and business owners

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publicly supported the campaign by offering workers the day off. Over 50 restaurants closed in Minneapolis, while in Passaic, New Jersey a range of businesses including beauticians and restaurants were closed. Similarly, 60 businesses in Greenville, South Carolina were closed for the day, and a third of pupils in the local elementary schools did not attend class (*USA Today*, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> #Artless also existed in the context of other related cultural interventions by museums and galleries protesting Trump's Presidency and policies. In early February 2017, the Museum of Modern Art (MOA) in New York had already set a precedent for cultural activism related to the travel ban, having re-hung part of its permanent collection to include artists from seven countries affected by Trump's executive order (Farago, 2017). Related digital initiatives were also underway, such as #dayoffacts, a campaign which aimed to 'fight alternative facts' (Vlachou, 2019) by urging museums and other public cultural institutions to share facts on their social media accounts. Taking place the day after #daywithoutimmigrants on the 17th February 2017, over 350 cultural institutions contributed to this campaign, amassing over 50,000 Tweets and Instagram posts, trending on Twitter and gaining over 3,000 Twitter followers by the end of the intervention (Kurlandsky, 2017). Though not directly related to the travel ban, this campaign did aim to challenge the policies and ideas within the Trump administration. As project leaders Alli Hartley and Mara Kurlandsky state: 'we felt it was important to communicate that museums wouldn't be abdicating their responsibilities to their visitors, and would not tolerate marginalization or oppression of any of their visitors' (2017).