

Banners unfurled at the Beaux-Arts Court of the Brooklyn Museum during action by Decolonize This Place, April 29, 2018. Photographs by Decolonize This Place and collaborators.

From Institutional Critique to Institutional Liberation? A Decolonial Perspective on the Crises of Contemporary Art*

MTL COLLECTIVE

The past decade has witnessed an intensive politicization of the art system, one that goes beyond the ubiquity of political themes in the work of high-profile artists, critics, and exhibitions. Rather, this politicization has involved a far-reaching crisis of legitimacy for major cultural institutions among the publics they claim to serve, as well as the cultural workers upon whose labor they depend. Museums, galleries, biennials, nonprofits, universities, and public agencies have been targeted with protests, demands, and grievances concerning the ways they are governed, the agents who govern them, and the ends to which they are governed. Numerous initiatives have subjected art institutions to public scrutiny, highlighting their complicity in perpetuating, concealing, or neglecting unjust and oppressive practices within and beyond the institution in question. Frequently making creative use of the architectural spaces and brand identities of such institutions, these activities have involved a variety of tactics, including petitions, pickets, strikes, boycotts, disruptions, occupations, shutdowns, callouts, hacks, and infiltrations. These initiatives have used the visibility of institutional platforms to hold institutional actors accountable to their own stated commitments, and have often involved demands for new commitments altogether.

Art institutions have thus been subjected to a double movement. On the one hand, their authority as gatekeepers and sanctifiers of cultural value has been significantly bypassed by cultural workers acting on their own accord without requiring institutional permission. On the other hand, the prestige of the institutions in question has proven valuable for leveraging visibility, publicity, and pressure relative to political aims and movements that straddle the artistic and extra-artistic realms.¹ Even as their authority as guardians of artistic legitimacy decreases, such institutions find themselves subjected to increasing demands for accountability in light of—and often exceeding—their declared values and missions. This “infra-

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1. See Kareem Estefan, Carin Kuoni, and Laura Raicovich, eds., *Assuming Boycott: Resistance, Agency, and Cultural Production* (New York: O/R Books, 2017), and Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (New York: Verso, 2016).

structural turn” by artists and activists is informed, in part, by a classic principle of what is known in art history as institutional critique: that art is not autonomous from the economic systems, ideological apparatuses, and institutional spaces within which it is produced, presented, and circulated.

Here we present a decolonial approach to these recent developments. This approach starts from a different place than the art-historical discourse of institutional critique, even while it may sometimes resemble or intersect with it. It resonates, for instance, with strands of that discourse that have highlighted cultural institutions as “spaces of subjection” involved in the reproduction of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and settler-colonialism, as embodied in the work of artists such as Renée Green, James Luna, and Fred Wilson.² It also finds affinities with direct-action groups from the late 1960s, such as the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition and Black Women Artists and Students for Black Liberation, that called for the radical overhauling of white-dominated institutions through measures of democratization, reparations, and redistribution.³ However, as an analytic and a practice, decolonization is a distinct approach to the crises of contemporary art, and it extends far beyond the art field and its associated institutions and forms of knowledge. In the most general sense, decolonization guides our efforts to become free through struggle—not as a ready-made program, but as a form of “epistemic disobedience,” an immanent practice of testing, questioning, and learning, grounded in the work of movement-building.⁴

First, it is important to define “decolonization” and its corollaries “decolonial,” “decolonize,” and “decoloniality.” As Eve Tuck and K. Wanye Yang have noted, in recent years this terminology has taken on an inflated status in the arts and humanities, providing a radical shell to familiar ideas and practices of multiculturalism that operate well within the comfort zone of established institutions.⁵ However, the term brings with it a set of histories and principles that themselves resist being reduced to an academic buzzword or intellectual trend. Decolonization is not an appeal to liberal tolerance or feel-good diversity; it is rather a combative process that has as its horizon another way of being in this world, one more amenable to our collective existence. While combative, decolonization is also creative. Working in the midst of the Algerian revolution, Frantz Fanon wrote, “Decolonization truly is the creation of new people. . . . The ‘thing’ colonized becomes a person through the very process of self-liberation.”⁶ While thinkers such as Fanon remain a crucial point of reference, the

2. See Jennifer González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); and Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

3. Rujeko Hockley and Catherine Morris, eds., *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–1985* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); and Aruna D’Souza, *Whitewalling: Art, Race, and Protest and 3 Acts* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2018).

4. Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 26, nos. 7–8 (2009), pp. 1–23; Lina Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

5. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012).

6. Frantz Fanon, “On Violence,” in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 2; translation modified.

“classical” definition of decolonization handed down from twentieth-century national-liberation movements, which centered on a “nation-people” taking control of the state, is not the end point for contemporary decolonization.

Today, in fact, there is no blueprint for what decolonization looks like. It is a process that is necessarily context- and place-specific. It requires a constant questioning of one’s own location in what Mignolo calls the “colonial matrix of power”—a matrix that is inherently linked to heteropatriarchal rule, as Maria Lugones has insisted—whether that be in places in the Global South that have undergone the uneven processes of formal decolonization, post-imperial European powers, or settler-colonial states such as Israel, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and the United States.⁷ Thus, for example, as we write this essay in New York City, we acknowledge that we are living and working on occupied Lenape land that was taken by force in the seventeenth century by the Dutch, a process coinciding with the introduction of chattel slavery to Manhattan Island.⁸ Indeed, much of the politically engaged art that has risen to prominence in recent years takes place on this same occupied terri-

7. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought, and De-Colonial Freedom,” and Maria Lugones, “The Coloniality of Gender,” in Walter Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, eds., *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (London: Francis and Taylor, 2013), pp. 369–90.

8. In making this land-acknowledgment in the present essay, we are mindful of the critique that such gestures can themselves become neutralizing rather than unsettling: As Tuck and Yang write, “Efforts to ‘decolonize’ institutions are embodied in ritual acts of acknowledging Indigenous presence and claims to territory. Within what is currently called the United States, these acknowledgements are increasingly—if only recently—understood as a prerequisite for demonstrating engagement with Indigenous communities. However, without continuous commitment to serve as accomplices to Indigenous people, institutional gestures of acknowledgement risk reconciling ‘settler guilt and complicity’ and rescuing ‘settler futurity.’” The New Red Order has taken up this question in engagements with the Whitney Museum, which in June 2018 posted a land acknowledgment on its website. See Hrag Vartanian, “Rituals of Liberation Intended to Unsettle at the Whitney Museum,” *Hyperallergic*, June 18, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/447207/the-new-red-order-the-savage-philosophy-of-endless-acknowledgement/>.

Julian Brave Noisecat speaks at a NYC Stands with Standing Rock rally at Washington Square Park, September 9, 2016. Photograph by Erik McGregor.



tory, even though the relation of such practice to this ongoing history is typically erased or taken for granted. Aman Sium, Chandni Desai, and Eric Ritskes frame the stakes of decolonization in this way: “The mental, spiritual and emotional toll that colonization still exacts is neither fictive nor less important than the material; but without grounding land, water, and air as central, decolonization is a shell game. We cannot decolonize without recognizing the primacy of land and Indigenous sovereignty over that land.”⁹

Indigenous land struggles are thus essential to a decolonial sense of history, and the precondition for the difficult work of constructing decolonial solidarity. As Tuck and Yang write, “Settler colonialism and its decolonization implicates and unsettles everyone.”¹⁰ They continue:

The United States, as a settler colonial nation-state, also operates as an empire—utilizing external forms and internal forms of colonization simultaneous to the settler colonial project. This means, and this is perplexing to some, that dispossessed people are brought onto seized Indigenous land through other colonial projects. Other colonial projects include enslavement . . . but also military recruitment, low-wage and high-wage labor recruitment (such as agricultural workers and overseas-trained engineers), and displacement/migration (such as the coerced immigration from nations torn by U.S. wars or devastated by U.S. economic policy). In this set of settler colonial relations, colonial subjects who are displaced by external colonialism, as well as racialized and minoritized by internal colonialism, still occupy and settle stolen Indigenous land. Settlers are diverse, not just of white European descent, and include people of color, even from other colonial contexts. This tightly wound set of conditions and racialized, globalized relations exponentially complicates what is meant by decolonization, and by solidarity, against settler-colonial forces.¹¹

Tuck and Yang’s framing of US settler-colonial conditions is crucial for the approach to art institutions developed by the group Decolonize This Place (discussed below). Another important point of reference is the Zapatista rebellion since 1994 in Chiapas, Mexico, widely recognized as the first revolutionary move-

9. Aman Sium, Chandni Desai, and Eric Ritskes, “Towards the ‘Tangible Unknown’: Decolonization and the Indigenous Future,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012), p. 5. It is important to note that the resurgent discourse of decolonization has been led by Indigenous scholars and activists. See Lina Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012); Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

10. Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” p. 10.

11. *Ibid.*

ment of the post–Cold War era beyond the frame of the nation-state. For nearly twenty-five years, in the face of state repression, the Zapatistas have defended and sustained an autonomous Indigenous territory that has become an inspiration and physical meeting place for radical movements around the world.

Decolonization is grounded in the practice of living, encompassing both daily acts of resistance, refusal, and sabotage, on the one hand, and economies of love, care, and mutual aid on the other. In other words, the ethos of decolonization is inseparable from process and practice rather than an ultimate outcome posited in advance. Mignolo suggests that decolonial practices involve a “delinking” from the normative political categories of modernity, reorienting struggle away from the state as an ultimate horizon (which is not to say that they could or should ignore the force of state power).¹² The “decolonial option” that emerges with this delinking from the state creates space for the sharing of “colonial wounds” across borders and movements.¹³ As Nelson Maldonado-Torres writes, “Decolonial movements tend to approach ideas and change in a way that does not isolate knowledge from action. . . . For them, colonization and dehumanization demand a holistic movement that involves reaching out to others, communicating, and organizing. A new kind of knowledge and critique are produced as part of that process. That is, decolonial knowledge production and critique are part of an entirely different paradigm of being, acting, and knowing in the world.”¹⁴

Over the past decade, movements that have shared these decolonial characteristics, on varying scales and durations, include Idle No More in Canada (2012), Black Lives Matter and Movement for Black Lives (2014–), Rhodes Must Fall and Tuitions Must Fall in South Africa (2015), No Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock Reservation (2016), and the ongoing struggle in occupied Palestine against the Israeli settler-colonial project. Decolonization as an analytic enables us to highlight intersections between such struggles without collapsing them. We see this when Angela Davis suggests the need to see the black uprisings in Ferguson alongside the intifadas of Palestinian youth, when Steven Salaita notes the historical connections between settler-colonialism in the United States and Israel, when black and brown communities take up the language of decolonization while defending neighborhoods under siege by real-estate capital and its state facilitators from the South Bronx to Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, or when movements against the criminalization, detention, and deportation of Latinx, Muslim, and other immigrants proclaim: “No ban on stolen land.”¹⁵

12. Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality, and the Grammar of De-Coloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2–3 (2007), pp. 449–514.

13. Rolando Vasquez and Walter Mignolo, “Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds / Decolonial Healings,” *Social Text Online*, July 15, 2013, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthetics-colonial-wounds-decolonial-healings/.

14. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality,” October 26, 2016, <http://frantzfanonfoundation-fondationfrantzfanon.com/article2360.html>.

15. See Angela Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (New York: Haymarket Books, 2016); Steven Salaita, *Inter/Nationalism: Decolonizing Native America and Palestine* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); John D. Marquez and Junaid Rana, “Black Radical Possibility and the Decolonial International,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* (2017) 116 (3), pp. 505–28.

Several guiding principles have emerged thus far in characterizing decolonization, which is always grounded in the specificity of place and process. First, it articulates a sense of the historical present distinct from the unfinished project of decolonization in the twentieth century focused on the nation-state. Second, it is anchored in the centrality of land, and Indigenous claims to that land, unsettling the space and time of settler-colonial societies while seeing the process of colonization, in the Americas at least, as intimately connected to the institution of slavery. Third, it generates knowledge and creativity in the course of practice, opening space for a “decolonial option.” Fourth, it is intersectional, highlighting affinities and building ties between apparently different struggles. Consequently, the process of decolonization seeks to reorient the questions and terms of our conversations about politics, knowledge, and art. If, as Mignolo suggests, modernity can be seen as deriving from coloniality, how does that change our relation to and interaction with the exemplary modern institutions of the museum and the academy?¹⁶ And how does that affect, inform, and challenge at a structural level the entire complex of culture in which contemporary art is produced, displayed, and experienced? In turn, how does this transform our sense of what is at stake in the proliferation of activism targeting art institutions in recent years, and indeed the entire trajectory of what is known as institutional critique?

Activism Targeting Art Institutions

In general, the resurgence of activism around artistic institutions in recent years has aimed to alter their conduct in light of their own stated commitments to civic engagement, cultural education, and aesthetic enrichment beyond the dictates of the market. However, these practices go well beyond Holland Cotter’s call to “make museums moral again,” that is, to restore a foundational set of liberal values, which have supposedly been distorted or lost, through improved governance of institutions as they exist.¹⁷ Unlike the professionalized paradigm of “social practice art” increasingly adopted as official policy by museums, city agencies, and non-profit organizations, these campaigns have been unafraid to forcefully antagonize the institutions with which they are engaged, often deliberately creating publicity crises and decision dilemmas for institutional governance.¹⁸

16. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

17. Holland Cotter, “Make Museums Moral Again,” *New York Times*, March 17, 2016.

18. For analyses of “social practice art” as a professionalized field of work sanctioned and funded by policy-makers, museums, and nonprofits, see Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson, and Dominic Willsdon, eds., *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), especially the conversation between Shannon Jackson and New York City cultural commissioner Tom Finkelpearl; and Carin Kuoni and Chelsea Haines, eds., *Entry Points: The Vera List Center Guide to Art and Social Justice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016). A “decision dilemma” is a scenario in which activists push their target into a situation where the latter is forced to either accede to the demand and thus aid the forward movement of the campaign or reject it in such a way that amplifies and magnifies its status as a bad actor, thus provoking further disapprobation and agitation. See the entry on “Decision Dilemma” in Andrew Boyd, ed., *Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution* (New York: O/R books, 2012).

*Global Ultra Luxury
Faction and the
Illuminator. Projection on
the Guggenheim Museum,
April 15, 2016.
Photograph by G.U.L.F.*



Such work is not limited to acts of negation or censure. Rather, it involves what Kuba Szreder calls “productive withdrawals” from business-as-usual in the art system by actors who supply the labor and ideas that keep that system running.¹⁹ While taking aim at specific policies and practices of institutions, such work often results in the temporary re-functioning of the institution, prefiguring what the institution could or should be beyond its current form. At its best, it reimagines the nature of artistic production, spectatorship, and institutionality itself, giving rise to some of the most striking analysis, imagery, and performance in contemporary art over the past decade.

Consider the Gulf Labor Campaign (GLC). Founded by artists including Walid Raad, Hans Haacke, Rene Gabri, and Ayreen Anastas, it has aimed to pressure the Guggenheim to redress the oppressive labor conditions of South Asian migrant workers at the construction site of its new branch on Abu Dhabi’s “Happiness Island.”²⁰ The group has involved *networking* through the social ecologies of the art system, *researching* the conditions of Abu Dhabi, and *performing* through creative actions directly targeting the museum.²¹ The last has been the province of the Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.), an autonomous offshoot of GLC known in part for its iconic projections on the facade of the flagship Frank Lloyd Wright structure, placing unauthorized propaganda on the walls of the

19. Kuba Szreder, “Productive Withdrawals: Art Strikes, Art Worlds, and Art as a Practice of Freedom,” *e-flux journal* 87 (December 2017), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/87/168899/productive-withdrawals-art-strikes-art-worlds-and-art-as-a-practice-of-freedom/>.

20. See Andrew Ross, ed., *High Culture / Hard Labor* (New York: O/R Books, 2016), in particular, Paula Chakravarty and Nitasha Dhillon, “Gulf Dreams for Justice: Migrant Workers and New Political Futures,” pp. 36–64.

21. See David Joselit, “The Art Effect,” *Cairo Review of Global Affairs* (Summer 2014), <https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/the-art-effect/>.



*Liberate Tate.
Hidden Figures.
Performance, Tate
Modern, September 7,
2014. Photograph by
Martin LeSanto
Smith/Liberate Tate.*

museum, and ultimately shutting it down on May Day 2015 with a sit-in that drew its visual language from the On Kawara exhibition on display at the time.²²

Another example is *Liberate Tate*, which after a five-year campaign succeeded in pressuring the Tate museum to end its sponsorship agreement with oil giant British Petroleum.²³ Over the course of the campaign, the group developed an extensive performative repertoire, often making art-historical citations. These included reanimating Malevich's *Black Square* during a blockbuster exhibition of the artist's work, transforming it into a participatory mass icon held aloft in the famous Turbine Hall as a cipher of both ecological apocalypse and revolutionary potential. Allied with *Liberate Tate* in its call for a movement of "fossil-free culture" are groups such as the Natural History Museum (whose deadpan name, logo, and pedagogical displays *détourn* those of the official institution). Inspired in part by the work of Haacke and Mark Dion, the Natural History Museum targets the worlds of science and museum professionals, and has forced US cultural institutions to remove climate-denying donors like the Koch brothers and, most recently, the Mercer family from their boards.²⁴

Other groups, such as W.A.G.E., Arts and Labor, and the People's Cultural Plan, have over the past decade taken on the precarious working conditions at the heart of the art economy itself. They have scored important wins, such as the adoption of W.A.G.E. compensation standards by an increasing number of institutions

22. For a detailed description of these actions, see McKee, *Strike Art*, pp. 1–6, 172–180.

23. For accounts of the campaign, see Mel Evans, *Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts* (London: Pluto Press, 2016); and *Liberate Tate*, "Confronting the Institution in Performance: *Liberate Tate's* Hidden Figures," *Performance Research* 20, no. 4 (2015), pp. 78–84.

24. On the analysis and tactics of the Natural History Museum (an iteration of the group Not an Alternative), see thenaturalhistorymuseum.org; Beka Economopoulos and Steve Lyons, "Museums Must Take a Stand and Cut Ties to Fossil Fuels," *The Guardian*, May 7, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/may/07/museums-must-take-a-stand-and-cut-ties-to-fossil-fuels>; and T. J. Demos's discussion of this work within a broader field of political ecology practices in *Against the Anthropocene* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2017).

and the unionization of art handlers at the Frieze Art Fair.²⁵ Meanwhile, art students have mobilized around their own conditions of precarity. This includes the resignation of USC students in response to the elimination of graduate teaching stipends, as well as the Free Cooper Union campaign, which blasted the hitherto unspoken politics of student debt in the art world into media visibility.

Of course, the election of Donald Trump precipitated a wave of action in and around the art system, beginning with the J20 Art Strike, a call for “collective noncompliance” addressed to art institutions for Inauguration Day. The call resulted in a wide range of responses, from the shuttering of galleries to the waiving of admissions fees at museums to special programming addressing the crisis, including the “Anti-Fascist speak out” organized by Occupy Museums in collaboration with the education department of the Whitney Museum.²⁶ As the organizers of the strike put it in an anonymous statement, “Despite its contradictions, the art world has significant amounts of capital—material, social, and cultural—at its disposal. The time has come to imagine and to implement ways of redirecting these resources in solidarity with broader social movements leading the way in the fight against Trumpism.”²⁷

25. See Mostafa Heddaya, “The Story Behind Frieze New York’s Decision to Hire Union Labor,” *Hyperallergic*, May 7, 2014, <https://hyperallergic.com/124066/the-story-behind-frieze-new-yorks-decision-to-hire-union-labor/>.

26. Leading up to and after J20, *Hyperallergic* published a range of critical reflections on the implications of the Art Strike call, including those by John Bowles, Coco Fusco, Andrew Weiner, Occupy Museums, and many more. For retrospectives on J20 in light of the variously traumatic and absurd unfolding of the Trump administration as seen through the prism of arts activism, see Nick Mirzoeff, “The Power of Protest One Year After the #J20 Art Strike,” January 19, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/422416/the-power-of-protest-one-year-after-the-j20-art-strike/>; and Noah Fischer, “The Ebbs and Flows of Resistance in the Art World,” *Hyperallergic*, January 29, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/423834/art-world-resistance/>.

27. “J20 Art Strike,” *October* 159 (Winter 2017), p. 144.



Pamela Sneed addresses the J20 Anti-Fascist Speak-Out at the Whitney Museum, January 20th, 2017. Photograph by Occupy Museums.

Since the election of Trump, campaigns targeting the nexus of what Andrea Fraser calls “philanthropy and plutocracy” have developed, with the intent to “challenge the trusteeship of patrons who support art institutions financially while also supporting politicians who undermine the values on which those institutions depend.”²⁸ This line of work resulted in an early win with the resignation of Steven Mnuchin, Trump’s treasury secretary, from the board of LA MoCA. Other actions have taken aim at the presence of Trump advisor Larry Fink on the board of MoMA, while Nan Goldin recently launched a campaign targeting the Sackler family, which made its fortune through expanding the deadly opioid industry across the US and whose name appears on dozens of cultural institutions.²⁹



Nan Goldin leads the “Pain Sackler” action at the Metropolitan Museum, March 11, 2018. Photograph by Sandi Bachom.

Finally, dovetailing with the energies of the post-inaugural Women’s March of 2017, the #metoo movement targeting sexual assault and gendered inequality in the culture industries has ramified into the art system as well. Far from a single-issue campaign, #metoo has been a system-wide indictment. It has utilized popular anti-sexist outrage against high-visibility predators from Trump to Harvey Weinstein to Knight Landesman in order to amplify deep-rooted feminist calls to combat the patriarchal violence that permeates institutions and relationships of every kind, while at the same time facing challenges to the default whiteness that has long characterized mainstream feminist culture in the United States.³⁰

Immediately after the election, artists such as Chitra Ganesh and Hannah Black pointed to the ways in which liberal shock in the face of Trump’s white

28. Andrea Fraser and Eric Golo Stone, “The Case of Steve Mnuchin,” *October* 162 (Fall 2017), p. 37.

29. See Nan Goldin’s statement in “Uses of Power,” *Artforum* (January 2018), and Benjamin Sutton, “Protesters at Metropolitan Museum Chant ‘Shame of Sackler,’ Targeting Donors Who Profited From Opioid Crisis,” *Hyperallergic*, March 12, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/431941/protest-metropolitan-museum-sackler-wing-opioid-crisis-nan-goldin/>.

30. See especially the campaign by We Are Not Surprised (WANS)—an allusion to Jenny Holzer’s truism “Abuse of power comes as no surprise”—targeting *Artforum*, at not-surprised.org. Also see Aruna D’Souza, “Worst-Case Scenarios: Contemporary Art’s #Metoo Handwringing,” *Momus*, March 21, 2018, <http://momus.ca/worst-case-scenarios-contemporary-arts-metoo-handwringing/>.

nationalism often served to efface deep, foundational structures of white supremacy in the art system and in the US at large.³¹ Two months after the J20 speak-out, the Whitney Biennial itself became a locus of conflict with the campaign launched by Parker Bright and Black calling for the destruction of Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* (2016)—a forceful invitation to the artist and the institution alike to set an example of how to redress enactments of white violence on the part of even well-intentioned actors in the art world.³² Soon after the controversy at the Whitney, Indigenous communities in Minneapolis successfully called for the deconstruction of Sam Durant's *Scaffold* (2012) at the Walker Art Center, a work originally intended to highlight traumatic settler violence that, from the vantage point of protesters, ended up recommitting such violence. Durant and museum director Olga Viso entered into a productive process of collaboration with those making the demand that ultimately resulted in the burial of the work. Rather than an abhorrent act of censorship, the process of dismantling and burying the work became a critical and creative process in its own right, and would later lead Viso to pen an influential *New York Times* article calling for the “decolonization of art museums,” arguing, “If museums want to continue to have a place, they must stop seeing activists as antagonists. They must position themselves as learning centers, not impenetrable centers of self-validating authority.”³³

Recent initiatives have also brought attention to the use of culture as a tool of “artwashing” by predatory real-estate developers and urban policymakers in facilitating the gentrification of US cities. The most visible case is Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, where local groups from the Latinx neighborhood have adopted a combative stance toward art-world actors, calling for a moratorium on new galleries and even for the community takeover of already existing ones.³⁴ In New

31. Chitra Ganesh, “Unpresided Times,” *Artforum*, January 11, 2017, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/id=65829>; and Hannah Black, “New World Disorder,” *Artforum*, February 27, 2017, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/section=slant#entry66897>. See also Andrew Stefan Weiner, “Emergency, Resistance, Futurity: Aesthetic Responses to Trumpism,” *X-TRA* 20, no. 2 (Winter 2018), <http://x-traonline.org/article/emergency-resistance-futurity-aesthetic-responses-to-trumpism/>.

32. See Aruna D'Souza, “Can White Artists Paint Black Pain?,” *Cnn.com*, March 24, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/24/opinions/white-artist-controversial-emmett-till-painting-dsouza/index.html>. See also Julia Halperin, “How the Dana Schutz Controversy—and a Year of Reckoning—Have Changed Museums Forever,” *artnet.com*, March 6, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/dana-schutz-controversy-recent-protests-changed-museums-forever-1236020>.

33. Olga Viso, “Decolonizing the Art Museum: The Next Wave,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2018. See Devon Van Houten Maldonado, “Sam Durant Speaks About the Aftermath of His Controversial Minneapolis Sculpture,” *Hyperallergic*, July 14, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/390552/sam-durant-speaks-about-the-aftermath-of-his-controversial-minneapolis-sculpture/>; and the remarks by Aruna D'Souza, Hrag Vartanian, and Chris Kraus, among others, in Alica Leter, “Let It Burn”: U.S. Art Critics Respond to the Walker's Takedown of *Scaffold*,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, June 1, 2017, <http://www.star-tribune.com/art-critics-from-around-u-s-respond-to-walker-s-takedown-of-scaffold/425745913/>.

34. See defendboyleheights.org, and Matt Stromberg, “Anti-Gentrification Coalition Calls for Galleries to Leave LA's Boyle Heights,” *Hyperallergic*, July 28, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/314086/anti-gentrification-coalition-calls-for-galleries-to-leave-las-boyle-heights/>. Among the targets of Defend Boyle Heights had been Laura Owens's 365 Project, a nonprofit arts space that shuttered in spring 2018 after several years of missteps in engaging with local activists. See the thoughtful essays by

York, the Chinatown Arts Brigade (CAB) has taken similar aim at the conjunction of art and displacement; this came to a head with a series of actions targeting an exhibition by Omer Fast at James Cohan gallery that involved the artist redesigning the space in the guise of a dilapidated local Chinese business—a smugly ironic commentary on the demographic shifts of the neighborhood that CAB and its allies labeled “racist poverty porn.” At the same time, the use of art as a “weapon of mass displacement,” to use Shellyne Rodriguez’s term, has come under fire in the South Bronx, where developers and celebrities have attempted to draw on the “gritty” history of hip-hop culture in their marketing of the area as a newly rezoned ultra-luxury enclave.³⁵



Chinatown Art Brigade protest outside the Omer Fast exhibition at the James Cohan gallery, October 27, 2017. Photograph by Elena Goukassian.

The diagnosis of artwashing has been taken up by artists and activists working to advance the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, Sanction (BDS) movement into the international art system as well. In this context, artwashing means the use of art and culture by the state of Israel to bolster its international reputation as a cosmopolitan and enlightened society even as it perpetuates violent policies of ethnic cleansing against the native Palestinian population dating back to the foundation of the state in 1948. In *Assuming Boycott: Resistance, Agency, and Cultural Production*, Kareem Estefan, Laura Raicovich, and Carin Kuoni note that boycott, in inviting participants to withdraw from interacting with oppressive regimes, is a matter not of negative restriction but of affirmative solidarity and creative opportunity.³⁶ Of all the arenas of arts activism in recent years, BDS has proven to be among the most agonistic given the power of the pro-Israeli lobby

Nizan Shaked on what it has meant for nonresident art workers to stand with local activists, “How to Draw a (Picket) Line: Activists Protest Event at Boyle Heights Gallery,” *Hyperallergic*, February 14, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/358652/how-to-draw-a-picket-line-activists-protest-event-at-boyle-heights-gallery/>, and “Why I Am Resigning from X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly and the Problems with 356 Mission’s Politics,” *Hyperallergic*, April 27, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/440234/x-tra-contemporary-art-quarterly-356-mission-boyle-heights/>.

35. See Shellyne Rodriguez, “The Bronx Is Burning: Neoliberalism, State Power, and Social Practice Art in the Birthplace of Hip-hop,” unpublished manuscript, April 2018.

36. See Kareem Estefan, “Introduction: Boycotts as Openings,” in Estefan, Kuoni, Raicovich, *Assuming Boycott*, pp. 11–17.

in the US, and Raicovich's explicit and implicit gestures of solidarity with the movement likely played a role in her ouster as director of the Queens Museum.³⁷

These campaigns are diverse in their tactics, aesthetics, and political horizons, but in each case we find a simultaneous decentering of institutional authority and intensification of accountability. What are cultural institutions for? Whom do they serve? How are they funded? How they are governed? What is to be done with them in the face of intensifying political emergencies? Such questions have been especially resonant for those working inside the targeted institutions. These actors sometimes have the opportunity to transform institutions in response to or in collaboration with outside agitators. They may partake in such campaigns with varying degrees of discretion and visibility, protection and risk, tacit support and overt engagement. In general, the line between "outsiders" and "insiders" in the art ecosystem is often blurred or ambiguous; indeed, this line is a site of political organizing in its own right. Of course, inequalities among those working in institutions are always potential areas of antagonism as well, especially as the structures of patriarchy and white supremacy that continue to define the labor that sustains these institutions come under increasing scrutiny.

All these projects amount to a historical phenomenon larger than the sum of its parts. However, they have yet to receive a sustained art-historical treatment, even as they often display a great deal of art-historical self-consciousness in their own right. What would constitute an adequate critical language for these phenomena in theoretical (rather than simply anecdotal) terms? Yates McKee has described a general impulse to "strike art" over the past decade, one that involves tactically moving between the world of social movements and the infrastructures of the art system; Kuba Szreder, as we have already noted, employs the figure of "productive withdrawal." Another recent concept that aims to define the kinds of work outlined above is "institutional liberation."³⁸

What could "institutional liberation" mean? Would it mean liberating the institutions in which many of us work—and if so, how, by whom, from what, and to what end? Would such a liberation itself be somehow institutional or institutionalized, or is it a liberation *from* institutions as they exist in favor of a new practice of anti- or counter-institutionality? As Samuel Weber once noted, "institution" shares an etymological root with "state," "statue," and "establishment."³⁹ It implies the setting up,

37. Robin Pogrebin, "Politically Outspoken Director Queens Museum Steps Down," *New York Times*, January 26, 2018; and Benjamin Sutton, "Departure of Queens Museum Director Prompts Calls for More Politically Engaged Art Institutions," *Hyperallergic*, January 31, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/424364/curators-letter-support-laura-raicovich-queens-museum/>.

38. Not an Alternative, "Institutional Liberation," *e-flux journal* #77 (November 2016). For an important elaboration on this phrase by one of its inventors that uses as a case study Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon's *Disobedient Objects* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2014–2015, see Steve Lyons, "Disobedient Objects: Towards a Museum Insurgency," *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, Volume 7.1 (April 2018), pp. 2–31.

39. On the aporetic structure of institution as both positing event and enduring arrangement, status, and state, see Samuel Weber, *Institution and Interpretation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981).

arranging, and consolidating of people and power in a fixed place with an enduring temporality. Although it may begin with an active event of positing, an institution typically tends toward the reproduction of a reified status quo through symbolic rites of authority, divisions of labor, distributions of resources, and normative forms of conduct.⁴⁰ Liberation, on the other hand, implies the de-establishing of fixed arrangements of power. It suggests the unleashing of people and places from enduring structures and fixed boundaries that are unjust or oppressive.

It is precisely this tension between institution and liberation that makes “institutional liberation” worth interrogating beyond the brisk manifesto published last year by the group Not an Alternative calling for “liberating institutions from capitalism.” The group writes, “The various projects we see combining into an emergent movement for institutional liberation do not value critique *qua* critique. They turn the institution against itself, side with its better nature, and force others to take a side.” This “movement,” as Not an Alternative calls it, sees “institutions as forms to be seized and connected into a counterpower infrastructure. They activate the power that is already there. More than a critique of institutions, institutional liberation affirms the productive and creative dimension of collective struggle. Our actions are not simply against. They are for: for emancipation, equality, collectivity, and the commons.” Not an Alternative understands institutional liberation as the “commandeering” of institutions, and in the process they polemically define themselves *against* what they see as two other positions. First, they call the building of new institutions “naive,” and they resist “overburdening ourselves with the overwhelming task of inventing entirely new political and social forms.”⁴¹ Second, they posit institutional liberation as a definitive surpassing of institutional critique, a plural and contested art-historical tradition that they reduce to a circular ethos of “critique for its own sake.”⁴²

It is true that the imaginative charge of “institutional liberation” comes from its alteration of the familiar term “institutional critique.” It intimates a transition from a familiar operation to a newly dynamic one, and certainly the principle of liberation is an urgent one to reactivate in the present moment.⁴³ However, any such reactivation must grapple with the legacies that the term brings with it, including those of nation-

40. Pierre Bourdieu, “Rites of Institution,” in *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 117–21.

41. Even though Not an Alternative was an important participant in Occupy, it forms the implicit “bad object” for their text, as when they distinguish institutional liberation from a caricature of anarchism as “DIY off-the-grid living.”

42. In an important article that appeared around the same time as that of Not an Alternative, Gregory Sholette argues that we are witnessing not the surpassing but rather the “return” of institutional critique: “Merciless Aesthetic: Activist Art as the Return of Institutional Critique. A Reply to Boris Groys,” *Field Journal* issue #4 (Spring 2016), <http://field-journal.com/issue-4/merciless-aesthetic-activist-art-as-the-return-of-institutional-critique-a-response-to-boris-groys>.

43. See Kate Khatib, ed., *We Are Many: Reflections on Movement Strategy from Occupation to Liberation* (Oakland: AK Press, 2012); and Chris Crass, *Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-Racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement-Building Strategy* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013).

al liberation, black liberation, and women's liberation in the 1960s and beyond. These overlap with the resurgent discourse of decolonization, especially in the case of Black Lives Matter, which has insisted, according to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, that black liberation is the precondition of liberation for everyone.⁴⁴ Without such a perspective, appeals to "liberation" are liable to result in the reproduction of settler futurity, entrenching rather than unsettling institutions that have been targeted for action in recent years.

In what follows, we retrace a history of institutional critique and consider the ways in which the overlapping trajectories of decolonization and liberation can inform the stakes of this art-historical concept and practice in the present. More pointedly, we push at the limits of what has emerged over the past few years as a growing mainstream consensus that institutions must be variously democratized, diversified, and improved in light of their stated ideals. The current crises of institutional authority can be tumultuous and even traumatic, but they also provide opportunities for ongoing radicalization when it comes to rethinking what institutions are or could be, especially as they might intersect with the work of movement-building. The latter is always a matter of testing and experimenting, training and learning over time, as much as it is the pursuit of an immediate and finite goal. This is especially the case in an arena as contradictory as that of contemporary art, situated as it is along the fault line of the elite ultra-luxury economy on the one hand and the radical aspirations of artists, critics, and curators invested in the liberatory possibilities of art on the other. The depth of these contradictions was put in harrowing terms by Helen Molesworth in an article published just weeks before her own firing from LA MoCA:

The museum, the Western institution I have dedicated my life to, with its familiar humanist offerings of knowledge and patrimony in the name of empathy and education, is one of the greatest holdouts of the colonialist enterprise. Its fantasies of possession and edification grow more and more wearisome as the years go by. . . . I confess that more days than not I find myself wondering whether the whole damn project of collecting, displaying, and interpreting culture might just be unredeemable.⁴⁵

44. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016). Here Taylor echoes the Combahee River Collective Statement of 1977: "Here we might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression." Emphasizing the need to struggle against the "interlocking systems" of white supremacy, patriarchy, class power, heterosexism, and imperialism simultaneously, this text is foundational for later theories of intersectionality, and has been an essential touchstone for the Black Lives Matter movement. See Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017). The text is also reproduced in Hockley and Morris, *We Wanted a Revolution*.

45. Helen Molesworth, "Art Is Medicine," *Artforum* (March 2018), pp. 171–72.

What Was Institutional Critique?

As an art-historical category, institutional critique has often been broken down into a sequence of generational “waves,” largely focused on institutions in Europe and the United States after the events of 1968 (with important counterexamples including Latin American avant-gardes like Tucumán Arde).⁴⁶ First, artists such as Michael Asher and Hans Haacke began to move from a strictly phenomenological concern with the embodied dynamics of perception, space, and architecture within the art institution toward a concern with the ideological structures and frames of the institution itself. Such work developed techniques of laconic spatial alteration (Asher’s literal removal of the boundary between display and commerce, Daniel Buren’s generic system of stripes), sociological mapping (Haacke’s data displays and visitor polls), ironic fiction (Marcel Broodthaers’s *Département des aigles*), and performative or process-based intervention (Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s feminist staging of the otherwise invisible maintenance labor sustaining the space of the gallery). By and large, this practice offered its critique from within the institution under scrutiny and was authorized by it.

At the same time, a cluster of self-organized groups beginning with the Art Workers Coalition (AWC) and the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition in 1969 began to frame the institution itself as the target of demands for democratization in terms of governance; accessibility; inequities of race, class, and gender; and the redistribution of art-world resources. Emerging from this ferment were smaller groups such as the Ad Hoc Women’s Art Committee and Black Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation. Such groups, while making specific demands on the institutions in question, also overlapped with the broader political imaginaries of the time like those of the antiwar movement, black liberation, and women’s liberation, and often involved the activation of antagonisms *within* the activist landscape as well in order to challenge dynamics of patriarchy and white supremacy therein.⁴⁷

The decade following the legitimization crisis of art institutions in the late 1960s saw the emergence of the alternative-spaces movement, with its own spectrum of structures, funding, and programming.⁴⁸ Influenced in many cases by feminist critiques of the exclusionary nature of mainstream art institutions, as well as by AWC’s earlier call for artists to be central to the governance of institutions,

46. On the historiography of institutional critique, see the introductions by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson to their edited volume *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); and Benjamin Buchloh’s foundational critical text “Conceptual Art, 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October* 55 (Winter 1990), pp. 105–43. Our account here is also informed by Sholette, “Merciless Aesthetic: Activist Art as the Return of Institutional Critique.”

47. See Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Hockley and Morris, *We Wanted a Revolution*; and D’Souza, *Whitewalling*.

48. See Julie Ault, “A Chronology of Selected Alternative Structures, Spaces, Artists Groups, and Organizations in New York City, 1965–1985,” in Ault, *Alternative Art New York*; and Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszewski, eds., *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces, 1960–2010* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012). Interestingly, both of these volumes were produced to accompany historical exhibitions held at historical alternative spaces in their own right: Drawing Center and Exit Art.



Michele Wallace (center) and Faith Ringgold (right) at the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) protest at the Whitney Museum, New York, January 31, 1971. © Jan Van Raay.

groundbreaking alternative spaces at this time included now-familiar organizations such as Artists Space, White Columns, the Kitchen, and El Museo del Barrio. These new institutions afforded unprecedented support for experimental, ephemeral, and non-commodified practices, including performance, video, and pedagogical projects informed by radical political currents of all kinds.⁴⁹ The alternative-space ecosystem overlapped in some cases with more overtly activist social centers combining art, community organizing, and urban subcultures of punk and hip-hop such as El Bohio and ABC No Rio on the Lower East Side.⁵⁰

The next wave of institutional critique was a subset of critical postmodernism in the 1980s, and involved a heightened attention to the violent colonial and racial histories underlying cultural institutions. This period witnessed James Luna's *Artifact Piece* (wherein the artist "played dead" by lying prone in a display case at the San Diego Museum of Man), Coco Fusco

and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *The Couple in the Cage* (a mimetic exacerbation of ethnographic display conventions during the 500th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas), and works by Fred Wilson, such as *A Guarded View* and *Mining the Museum*, concerning the epidermal economies of race in US museums.⁵¹ Coinciding with the rise of postcolonial theory in the humanities and social sciences, these developments prompted curators, educators, and audiences alike to rethink the very idea of the museum itself, and they have continued to ramify in the present.

The late 1980s also saw the emergence of the Guerrilla Girls, whose works targeted the gendered and racial inequities of the art system. Revivifying avant-

49. It is important of course not to idealize these (largely white-dominated) institutions as unproblematically radical, or to gloss over the very different histories of a space like that of El Museo del Barrio versus that of Artists Space, the latter of which was famously targeted by the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition for the "Nigger Drawings" exhibition. See D'Souza, *Whitewalling*.

50. See Alan W. Moore, *Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York City* (Brooklyn: Autonomia, 2011).

51. See González, "Fred Wilson: Material Museology," in *Subject to Display*, pp. 64–119.

garde legacies of anonymous agitprop and confrontational collective performance, they enacted a politics of representation that addressed the psychic and visual structures of patriarchy—including in the discipline of art history itself.⁵² Embedded in ACT-UP as a direct-action movement, Gran Fury developed highly effective forms of agitprop during this same period as well. Interwoven with the development of postmodern art and the emergence of queer theory, the work of Gran Fury involved skillful collaboration with sympathetic artistic institutions and platforms such as Dia, the Kitchen, and the New Museum for the purposes of movement-building.⁵³

By the mid-1990s, ACT-UP had largely folded into the work of professional advocacy, and there was a lull in social movements in the face of Clintonite neoliberalism. At this point, institutional critique confronted two possible deadlocks. The first, identified by Miwon Kwon, was the potential domestication of critical gestures, such that the artist became less an unsettling provocateur than a traveling professional service-provider, formulaically enacting critique-for-hire at one place after another.⁵⁴ The second risk involved a turn away from matters of proactive political concern toward a reflexive tarrying with the ironic double-binds, entrepreneurial games, and insouciant subcultures of the art system itself (of the kind described in Lane Relyea's *Your Everyday Artworld*).⁵⁵ These included Art Club 2000's performative mimicking of "subversive" corporate branding culture, Christian-Phillip Muller's embedding with the Ringier advertising company in order to supposedly "détourn" the design of its annual shareholders report, Carey Young's training herself in market-populist self-presentation techniques, Laura Cottingham's *Anita Pallenberg Story* (a send-up of the "rock star" aura surrounding certain bad-boy artists in the era of the dot-com bubble), and Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* (wherein her dealer facilitated a twenty-thousand-dollar exchange of sex for money between the artist and an anonymous collector under the post-Conceptual rubrics art-as-contract and performance-for-the-camera). This strand of work was not uncritical, but it was akin to the "cynical reason" that compounds, rather than dialectically redeems, defeated models of critique and resistance.⁵⁶ However insightful such work has been about the logics of affective labor

52. See Guerrilla Girls, *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls* (New York: Penguin, 1995); and *The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art* (New York: Penguin, 1998).

53. See Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

54. Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site-Specificity," *October* 80 (Spring 1997), pp. 85–110. Kwon's argument builds on Hal Foster's critique of what he calls "the artist as ethnographer" in *Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

55. For a textured look at the social milieu of second-wave institutional critique surrounding institutions including American Fine Arts and the Whitney ISP, see Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Artworld* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

56. Indeed, it is perhaps in part for this reason that an artist like Thomas Hirschhorn, with his joyfully unironic declarations of love for radical figures like Heartfield and Bataille, would prove to be so appealing to critics like Foster. Compare Hal Foster's "The Art of Cynical Reason" in *Return of the Real* with his "Towards a Grammar of Emergency," *New Left Review* 68 (March–April 2011), pp. 105–18.

and neoliberal entrepreneurialism, collective political struggle in the sense once associated with AWC or ACT-UP was off the agenda.

In a kind of coda to the hyper-reflexivity of 2003's *Untitled*, Fraser wrote a major essay titled "From the Critique of Institutions to the Institution of Critique" in 2005. "With each attempt to evade the limits of institutional determination, to embrace an outside, to redefine art or reintegrate it into everyday life, to reach 'everyday' people and work in the 'real' world," she writes, "we expand our frame and bring more of the world into it. But we never escape it."⁵⁷ Fraser seemed to justify a practice that was concerned only with the art system itself: "But just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc. And what we do outside the field, to the extent that it remains outside, can have no effect within it. So if there is no outside for us . . . it is because the institution is inside of us, and we can't get outside of ourselves." Yet her argument actually pointed in two directions. Although it could be read as a cynical apologia for the insular concern with art-world dynamics that her own work seemed to exemplify at the time, it also suggested, however obliquely, that any political engagement in the name of art or on the part of artists would need to grapple with the historical and institutional entanglements of the art system. The latter insinuation would prove to be prescient for the evolution of arts activism in the coming decade.

However, it was the first of these readings—that institutional critique had degenerated into a form of "discursive self-limitation"—that provided the foil for the theorization of a "fourth wave" of institutional critique by critics Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray in the late 2000s.⁵⁸ Fueled in part by the energies of the alter-globalization protests of the early 2000s, this era of critique involved a politically motivated exodus from the mainstream institutions of art to the field of social movements. Raunig and Ray argued that such a movement constituted a "transversal" engagement between artistic and activist fields, as opposed to a simplistic anti-art gesture. This involved what Raunig called "instituent practices," by which he intended a rethinking of institutional critique in its entirety through the lens of Foucault's late theses on governmentality.⁵⁹ For Foucault, the critical questioning of the "arts of government" developed by the modern capitalist state began with asserting a will "not to be governed, in that way, for that, by them."⁶⁰ This attitude

57. Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to the Institution of Critique," *Artforum* (September 2005), p. 104.

58. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray, eds., *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique* (London: Mayfly Books, 2009).

59. Gerald Raunig, "Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Transforming, Instituting," in *Art and Critical Practice*, pp. 3–11.

60. See Michel Foucault, "What Is Critique?," in *The Politics of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Semiotexte, 1992), pp. 23–82. On governmentality and the modern museum, see Tony Bennet, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995). Rosalyn Deutsche has also drawn upon Foucault's idea of the "politics of the governed" in "The Art of Not Being Governed Quite So Much," in *Hans Haacke*, ed. Rachel Churner (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

did not entail merely a reformist adjustment to the existing order or a complete exit from power into some kind of unmediated freedom. For Foucault, critique is an activity that is bound up with new forms of conduct and exercises of power on the part of the governed. These activities can involve the rearranging of power relations within an institution in such a way as to radically alter its mode of governing, but they can also include the founding of new institutional forms altogether. Raunig is interested in the tension between the institution as the dynamic event of positing new arrangements of forces and as an established entity that consolidates and reproduces those arrangements over time. For Raunig, the “fourth wave” of institutional critique works within this tension between dynamic action and the setting up of enduring structures. Raunig suggests that “instituent power” can keep in check the tendency of congealed structures to ossify or become oppressive, while at the same time helping to accumulate and bind temporary energies that would otherwise burn out.

Raunig’s analysis is more theoretical than empirical, but his primary example is that of artists embedding themselves in the work of self-governed “social centers” in cities like Amsterdam, Barcelona, and Athens during the 2000s. Often these were squatted or expropriated buildings repurposed as communal kitchens, media labs, fabrication workshops, and organizing hubs. Some spaces were under continual siege by police, while others received legal recognition and even public funding through progressive policies.⁶¹ Some linked into broader artistic ecosystems, while others separated from them. All in all, however, these spaces were instituent in the sense that they were founded and governed by their own participants over time with the explicit aim of building and sustaining radical social movements. Art has often been central to them, but the form of institutionality they enact—their governance, divisions of labor, programming, audience, and overall *raison d’être*—is utterly different from that of a museum, a gallery, a university, or even an alternative space of the kind developed in the US in the 1970s.

Examples of such spaces have been less common in the United States than in Europe. An exception is 16 Beaver, situated in one of the few surviving light-industrial buildings in the Wall Street district of lower Manhattan. Though not a squat—it was sustained through a rent-sharing agreement with several other organizations—it was run as a movement commons, hosting a stream of artists, intellectuals, and activists from around the city and indeed the world over the course of its life span from 2000 to 2015. Though many of its participants maintained connections to the institutional worlds of art and academia—often channeling these resource flows into the ever-precarious subsistence of the space itself—16 Beaver was entirely autonomous from such worlds. In the summer of 2011, 16 Beaver became one incubator of the Occupy Wall Street movement that launched just outside its doorstep, forging a historic intersection between the energies of the

61. On this trans-European history, see Bart van der Steen, Ask Katzeff, and Leendert Van Hoogenhuijze, eds., *The City Is Ours: Squatting and Autonomous Movements from the 1970s to the Present* (Oakland: PM Press, 2014); and Alan W. Moore and Alan Smart, eds., *Making Room: Cultural Production in Occupied Spaces* (Berlin: Other Forms Press, 2016).

2011 uprisings around the world and the networks of artists, activists, and intellectuals that 16 Beaver had cultivated in New York for more than a decade.⁶²

Occupy was the most extreme example of an exodus from the art system in recent memory, giving rise to a set of instituent practices entirely indifferent to the art world and motivated by the imperatives of anti-capitalist movement-building. And yet, within weeks of the initial occupation, certain strands within Occupy, such as Occupy Museums and Arts and Labor, had begun to turn their sights back on the art world, now understood as an exemplary site of both 1% oligarchy and precarious labor. Writing in response to Occupy in late 2011, Fraser underwent a subtle shift in orientation in tandem with the analysis put forth by Occupy Museums and other groups. She maintained her skepticism toward extra-artistic claims being made by artists, but rather than a static deadlock, the immanence of artists to the art system seemed to offer a political opportunity of the kind she had obliquely noted in her 2005 text. “Any claim that we represent a progressive social force while our activities are directly subsidized by the engines of inequality can only contribute to the justification of that inequality—the (not so) new legitimation function of art museums,” Fraser now wrote. “The only ‘alternative’ today is to recognize our participation in that economy and confront it in a direct and immediate way in all of our institutions.”⁶³ Fraser’s call to recognize and confront set forth a challenge to artists, critics, and curators who had long used “the market” as a foil for critique.⁶⁴

Informed by the Occupy lexicon of the “1%,” Fraser’s call to combine an immanent critique of the art system with confrontational action echoed the then-developing Gulf Labor coalition. The group was formed in 2010 in response to the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi being built on Saadiyat (“Happiness”) Island off the coast of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Saadiyat cultural district includes a branch of the Louvre (which opened in November 2017) as well as a Guggenheim Abu Dhabi by Frank Gehry, the Sheikh Zayed National Museum by Foster + Partners, and a performing-arts center by Zaha Hadid. South Asian workers building Saadiyat Island leave family, friends, and loved ones for the promise of the “Gulf dream” in Abu Dhabi. They incur substantial debt in order to leave their home country and obtain construction work that pays very little. While in the UAE, workers are generally housed in remote, segregated, and surveilled worker camps. They have no rights to worker representation or any form of collective bargaining, and when they organize strikes and slowdowns in response to poor living conditions or lack of payment, the punishment leveled by employers is often harsh, including indiscriminate imprisonment and/or deportation.⁶⁵

62. See McKee, *Strike Art*, pp. 89–93.

63. Andrea Fraser, “L’1%, C’est Moi,” *Texte Zur Kunst* 83 (September 2011), p. 126.

64. See *Artforum*’s special issue on “The Market” (April 2008).

65. See Chakravarty and Dhillon, “Gulf Dreams for Justice; Migrant Workers and New Political Futures,” pp. 36–64.

The idea of the Gulf Labor Campaign (GLC) emerged during a 2010 conference (Home Works Forum 5) hosted by Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, when, after direct dialogue with the Guggenheim led nowhere, a boycott of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi was launched at the Sharjah Biennale that same year. At the time, GLC demanded that the Guggenheim ensure that migrant-worker rights be protected during the construction of museums on Saadiyat Island. What began as an artist-organized and -led boycott, in which artists pledged to withhold their artwork from acquisition by the museum, evolved over time in the face of the Guggenheim's refusal to address these labor conditions. GLC tactics came to include periodic email updates, publications, educational public programs, exhibitions (such as participation in the 56th Venice Biennale), research trips to the UAE and countries where some of the workers originate, and the tactic of *52 Weeks*, which leveraged art and creativity in the service of the campaign. In this project, every week for fifty-two weeks, a different artist submitted work that spoke to labor issues in the building of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and more broadly to the relation of arts and labor; this was a way to exert pressure on the Guggenheim and to build solidarity beyond the boycott. The visibility and impact of GLC ebbed and flowed during its first four years, but in 2014 the campaign entered a new phase of global media coverage with a series of confrontational direct actions at the Guggenheim in New York by a new entity called Global Ultra-Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.). These included aggressively disrupting the brand image and the day-to-day operation of the museum in order to force officials into dialogue.

GLC and G.U.L.F. were transversal in a way unanticipated by Raunig in his account of the fourth wave of institutional critique. Raunig had conceived this version primarily in terms of experimental, small-scale cultural spaces largely indifferent to the official art system. Though emerging out of the ferment of 16 Beaver and Occupy, GLC and G.U.L.F. were now activating the resources of the art system (the cultural capital and media visibility of artists) to directly target a major institution within that system. While pressuring the institution with specific demands for accountability, GLC also proposed a model of what political organizing within the art system could look like. However, from the perspective of the direct-action group G.U.L.F., GLC risked falling into the logic of a narrowly single-issue campaign, given its lack of success in connecting with other boycotts and struggles in the art world and beyond. G.U.L.F.'s set of concerns extend far beyond conditions on Saadiyat Island. In a manifesto titled "On Direct Action: An Address to Cultural Workers," G.U.L.F. states that the struggle around art-world institutions such as the Guggenheim should be understood in terms of a broader complex of the "global ultra luxury economy, underpinned by empire and white supremacy." This expanded frame of analysis also means a shift in political horizons. Without overlooking the specifics of the labor campaign, G.U.L.F. argued that struggles like Black Lives Matter and that of Palestine required rethinking art and activism in newly radicalized terms: "We do not imagine the workers as victims to be saved,

but rather as fellow human beings whose freedom is bound up with our own. We have connected with their struggle because our own dignity depends on it. Our liberation is either collective or it is nonexistent.”⁶⁶ As a follow-up to this statement, G.U.L.F. used the platform of the Venice Biennale to connect the struggle of migrant workers in Abu Dhabi to that of Palestinians in occupied Palestine. In an unsanctioned action, G.U.L.F. altered the GLC banner hanging in the Arsenale by marking it with the popular cartoon figure “Handala,” a symbol of Palestinian resistance. It also occupied the Israeli pavilion and held a conversation about the

66. G.U.L.F., “On Direct Action: An Address to Cultural Workers,” in Ross, *The Gulf: High Culture / Hard Labor*, p. 135.



*Global Ultra-Luxury Faction May Day action
at the Guggenheim Museum, May 1, 2015.
Photograph by G.U.L.F.*

Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement against Israel. It was a connection that GLC was incapable of making because it saw itself as a campaign specific to the working conditions in Abu Dhabi; the limited analytical framework of GLC did not permit it to stand in explicit solidarity with Palestine.

The tension surrounding G.U.L.F.'s insistence on BDS made clear that the work of pressuring elite institutions was not an end in itself for the group but a process of "collective liberation": "We target the Guggenheim in New York because it is a gateway into a larger struggle. . . . From acting we are learning a new way of thinking. Let each action be an opportunity to test, to train in the practice of freedom. Let us reimagine what art can be as a force of liberation and solidarity across borders."⁶⁷ Learning from the shortcomings of GLC, members of G.U.L.F. met to evaluate the landscape of the art world shortly after Venice. In the fall of 2015, the group decided that decoloniality would be made an explicit framework for articulating a shared politics of liberation while maintaining the specificities of each struggle.

Decolonize This Place

Decolonize This Place became known in the art world during its three-month residency at Artists Space in the fall of 2016.⁶⁸ The group had its origins, however, in an action targeting the Brooklyn Museum in the spring of that year. Late in 2015, the museum was set to open an exhibition titled *Agitprop!* that

67. G.U.L.F., "On Direct Action," p. 135.

68. For overviews of the project, see Angela Brown, "'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor': Artists Space Steps Out of Analysis and Into Action," *Artnews*, November 15, 2016, <http://www.artnews.com/2016/11/15/decolonization-is-not-a-metaphor-artists-space-steps-out-of-analysis-and-into-action/>; Ilana Novick, "Learning from Decolonize This Place," *Hyperallergic*, January 9, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/350186/learning-from-decolonize-this-place/>; and Terence Trouillout, "Decolonize This Place," *Brooklyn Rail* (December 6, 2016), <https://brooklynrail.org/2016/12/artseen/decolonize-this-place>.



Global Ultra Luxury Faction applies a stencil of "Handala" to the Gulf Labor Coalition installation at the Venice Biennale, 2015. Photograph by Hrag Vartanian.

featured artists from the Russian Constructivists to Gran Fury, the Yes Men, and Occupy Museums—an indication of the extent to which radical practices had come to be recognized by art institutions in the years following 2011.⁶⁹ Before it opened, it was discovered that the museum would also be hosting the annual Brooklyn Real Estate Summit, an event unabashedly devoted to highlighting “undercapitalized” neighborhoods as targets of gentrification—demonstrating a major divide between the museum’s supposed commitment to serving the people of Brooklyn and its actual complicity with processes of racialized displacement. News of the summit was met with protests by local groups from the Brooklyn Anti-Gentrification Network (BAN) in coalition with several artists in the *Agitprop!* exhibition, who issued demands that the summit be canceled and that the museum commit itself instead to holding a People’s Summit on Gentrification in Brooklyn. Ignoring the first demand, the museum proceeded with the Real Estate Summit; the second demand was channeled into closed-door negotiations with artists involved in *Agitprop!* that dragged on into 2016 and bore little fruit. In the meantime, a *People’s Monument to Anti-Displacement Organizing*—produced by a collective of artists from within and beyond the show itself including Occupy Museums, Chinatown Art Brigade, and Artists of Color Bloc—was installed in *Agitprop!* in collaboration with Crown Heights anti-displacement activist Alicia Boyd of Movement to Protect the People, highlighting the ongoing summit controversy within the very space of the exhibition itself. As Betty Yu and Noah Fischer wrote, “It is important to note that this work is *not* the result of an invitation by the Brooklyn Museum but rather came out of a demand and negotiation between the artists and the museum after the fallout of the Real Estate Summit in 2015.”⁷⁰

In a seemingly unrelated development, a new exhibition titled *This Place* opened adjacent to *Agitprop!* It was devoted to the work of blue-chip art photographers such as Stephen Shore and Thomas Struth, who had been funded to photograph Israel and the occupied West Bank.⁷¹ According to the curator, the aim of the exhibition was to “challenge viewers to go beyond polarizing narratives found in mainstream media” in favor of “a deeply humanistic and nuanced examination that reminds us of the place of art, not as an illustration of conflict, but as a platform for raising questions.” Though not technically in violation of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions criteria, *This Place* was nevertheless part and parcel of the artwashing of the occupation, which is to say the promotion of “Brand Israel” through artistic and cultural institutions.

In May 2016, a newly formed coalition called Decolonial Cultural Front emerged to draw a link between the two exhibitions: “How can the museum in one

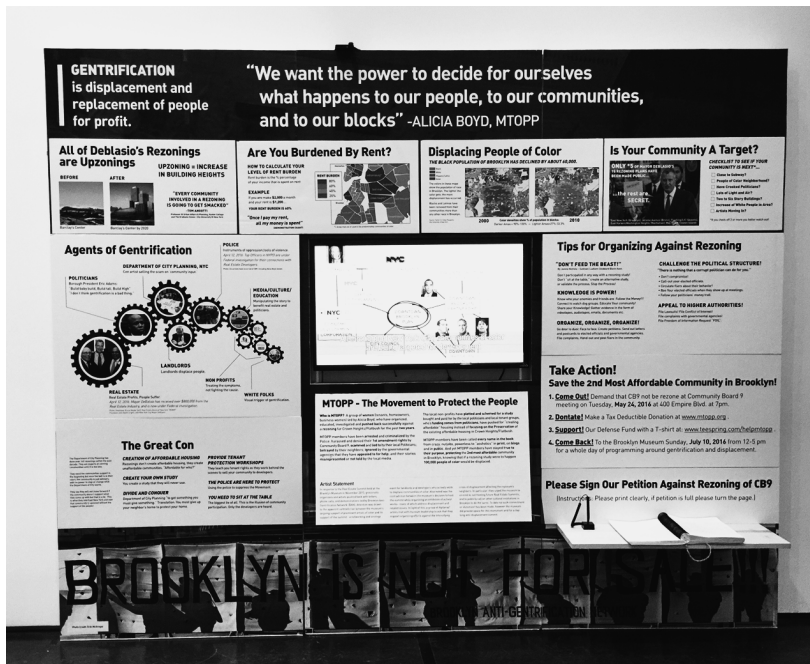
69. Holland Cotter, “The Art of Politics, in ‘Agitprop!’ at the Brooklyn Museum,” *New York Times*, December 17, 2015.

70. Noah Fischer and Betty Yu, “A People’s Monument to Anti-Displacement Organizing,” April 18, 2016, <http://artcity.com/2016/04/18/a-peoples-monument-to-anti-displacement-organizing/>.

71. For a detailed review of the show itself, see Nina Felshin, “A Photo Exhibition About Israel and the West Bank That Chooses Sides,” *Hyperallergic*, May 13, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/298529/a-photo-exhibition-about-israel-and-the-west-bank-that-chooses-sides/>.

gallery claim to be presenting the vanguard of political art,” DCF wrote, “and in the very next gallery lend itself to a spectacle of artwashing a people out of existence?”⁷² The group staged a two-pronged action targeting both *This Place* and the stalled negotiations surrounding *Agitprop!* More than a hundred people gathered in the *This Place* gallery, and an assembly was inaugurated by a collective acknowledgment that the action was taking place on occupied Lenape land. Then a team of guides led an unauthorized counter-tour of the exhibition that culminated in the relabeling of Shore’s landscape photographs with native Palestinian place-names in Arabic (the artist had originally used default Israeli Hebrew names for the occupied land featured in the images). *Détourning* the title of the exhibition itself with each relabeling, the tour guides mic-checked to the crowd the phrase “Decolonize *this place* . . . *this place* . . . *this place*.” As police arrived and shut down the gallery, people flooded into the neighboring *Agitprop!* exhibition. There they repeated the incantation “Decolonize this place!” and issued two new demands in addition to the call for a “People’s Summit”: that the museum adhere to the BDS criteria and that all real-estate executives be removed from the board. The

72. Decolonial Cultural Front pamphlet distributed at Brooklyn Museum, May 7, 2016.



Alicia Boyd and collaborators. A People’s Monument to Anti-Displacement Organizing. 2016. Installation view of the Brooklyn Museum’s *Agitprop!* exhibition, 2016. Photograph by Occupy Museums.

Agitprop! gallery was also shut down by police, and demonstrators were forced out of the building, leading to an assembly held in front of the museum.⁷³

As a result of the action and ensuing media pressure, the museum announced that it would collaborate with local organizers to convene a People's Summit on Gentrification. It was a demonstration of how direct-action interventions can force the hand of otherwise negligent or unresponsive institutions by creating crises for their brand image and disrupting the normal functioning of their operations.⁷⁴ While the other demands were ignored by the museum, their significance lay less in their being immediately met by the institution than in the new intersection of struggles facilitated by the action itself.

The call to “decolonize this place” originally uttered inside *This Place* went far beyond a single exhibition about Israel. The deictic shifter “this place” functioned as a mobile, iterative structure across and between sites: Decolonize *this* place, and *this* place, and *this* place.⁷⁵ The phrase thus enabled a form of mapping, weaving together specific “sites of injustice” across the city.⁷⁶ In her canonical analysis of site-specific art, Miwon Kwon cautioned against the figure of an itinerant artist who indifferently moves from “place to place” executing interventions that ultimately have more to do with the brand of the artist than the places in question. Instead, drawing on Homi Bhabha, she challenged artists and critics to undertake the task of “demarcating the *relational specificity* that can hold in tension the distant poles of spatial experiences. Only those cultural practices that have this relational sensibility can turn local encounters into long-term commitments and transform passing intimacies into indelible, unretractable social marks so that the sequence of sites that we inhabit in our life's traversal does not become generi-



Decolonial Cultural Front. Relabeling of photograph by Stephen Shore in the This Place exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, 2016. Photograph by MTL+.

73. Michelle Chen, “Gentrification and Occupation at the Brooklyn Museum,” *The Nation*, May 9, 2016; Rebecca McCarthy, “Faced with Brooklyn Museum’s Inaction, Protesters Target Two Exhibitions,” *Hyperallergic*, May 9, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/297401/faced-with-brooklyn-museum-inaction-protesters-target-two-exhibitions/>.

74. Ben Davis, “Activism Pays Off, as Brooklyn Museum Embraces Anti-Gentrification Forum,” *Artnet*, July 7, 2016, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/brooklyn-museum-gentrification-forum-543926>.

75. On the deictic shifter, see Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 196–209.

76. On “mapping sites of injustice with our bodies,” see Judith Butler, “So What Are the Demands?,” in *Tidal: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy* 2 (March 2012), pp. 8–11.

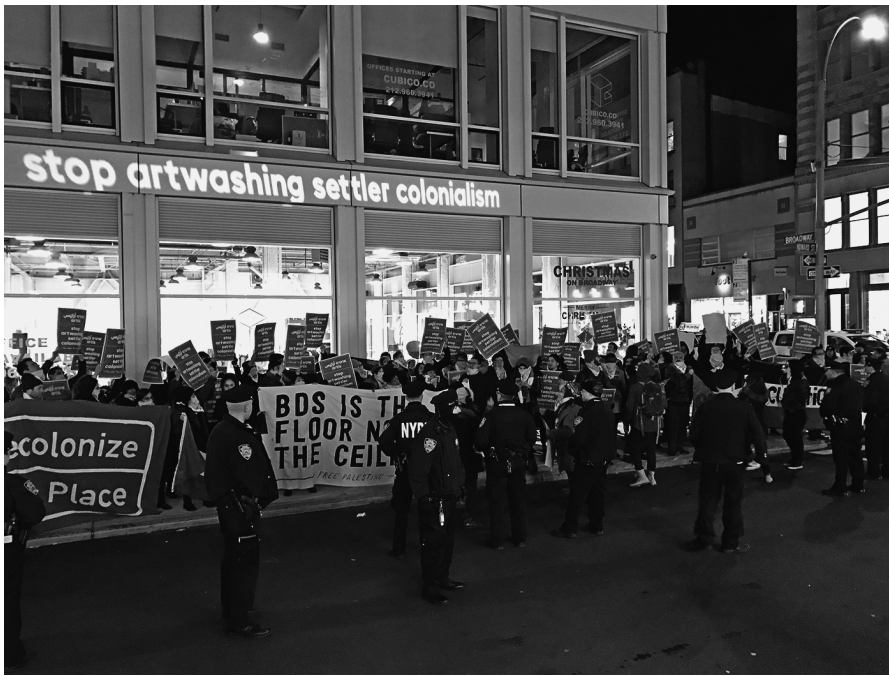
cized into an undifferentiated serialization, one place after another.”⁷⁷ Kwon’s imperatives of both “relational specificity” and “long-term commitments” resonate deeply with the sensibility of *Decolonize This Place*.

What, then, did it mean to transpose “Decolonize this place” from the Brooklyn Museum to a very different institution such as Artists Space, which was less a target of forceful antagonism than a site of sympathetic collaboration? In early 2016, the group received an official invitation at the behest of Common Practice New York (CPNY).⁷⁸ The initial invitation from Artists Space was to curate an exhibition that would last for three months. But the group opted instead for what it called a “movement commons.” The principles of the project were derived from months of discussion with various groups throughout the city to determine what kind of space could allow for decolonial solidarity to emerge, one that would actively work to facilitate the dismantling of patriarchy and the decentering of whiteness in its internal working culture as well as its outward-facing manifestations. The work began with addressing the fact that Artists Space itself was located on both occupied Lenape land and a rapidly gentrifying frontier on the edge of Chinatown. These foundational points in turn informed the five strands of artistic and organizing work that anchored the project in terms of its activities and collaborating groups: Indigenous struggle, black liberation, free Palestine, de-gentrification, and global wage workers. Core collaborators included NYC Stands with Standing Rock, Chinatown Arts Brigade, Insurgent Poets Society, NYC Students for Justice in Palestine, Take Back the Bronx, Mahina Movement, and Justice for Akai Gurley.

With the core principles, strands, and collaborators established, the movement space grew organically through further connections and relationships after opening on September 17, 2016, the fifth anniversary of Occupy Wall Street. The choice of this date was intended not as a celebration but as a retrospective reframing of that earlier movement in terms of both its promises and limitations, especially when seen against the horizon of decolonization (indeed, the first banner to be hung in the space read *DE-OCCUPY*). Over the course of its three-month existence, the space mimicked that of Zuccotti Park, but now with political parameters, an architectural container, and institutional support. The project was approached not in terms of a critique of Artists Space per se, but rather as a creative testing-out of its potential as a temporary movement-building infrastructure. It was mutually agreed that *Decolonize This Place* had full autonomy and that the space would no longer visibly appear to be Artists Space, except when the institu-

77. Kwon, “One Place After Another,” p. 110.

78. CPNY is a coalition of old and new alternative spaces grappling with their public purpose and economic viability in the face of both accelerating gentrification and the official neglect of such putatively “elite” institutions by the New York Department of Cultural Affairs in its devising of an NYC Cultural Plan. For a theorization of the questions facing these small, flexible, “proposition-based” institutions, see David Joselit, “In Praise of Small” (2015), commonpracticenyc.org.



*Decolonize This Protest action at Artis, December 10, 2016.
Photograph by Hrag Vartanian.*

tional profile of Artists Space could amplify certain events and projects. Here Decolonize This Place functioned as a model of what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call an “undercommons,” a fugitive “liberation” of institutional resources and relationships otherwise locked away in official modes of institutional governance.⁷⁹

Resources were provided to construct a kitchen and to offer stipends and honoraria for those sustaining the space, and a standing budget was created for organizing actions launched from the space. With the close collaboration of the staff, Artists Space became a thoroughly different kind of place in terms of its day-to-day operations, public profile, mode of organization, and audience. Beyond its vital tradition of subterranean support for activist groups, Artists Space was now transformed into a highly visible round-the-clock movement hub. This work comprised an intensive layering of meetings, performances, trainings, dinners, and agitprop parties. It also featured discursive panels that mixed together high-profile academics such as Robin D.G. Kelley, Mabel Wilson, and David Joselit with an array of groups involved in the

79. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).

day-to-day work of the space such as El Salon, Mahina Movement, Insurgent Poets Society, Chinatown Arts Brigade, Take Back the Bronx, New York Stands with Standing Rock, and the United Melanin Society. Flyers, pamphlets, posters, and stickers were produced and disseminated by the thousands.⁸⁰ Rather than a discrete set of objects for display, Decolonize This Place involved an aesthetically dynamic reconfiguration of the gallery environment, transforming it into an endlessly mutating montage of large-scale banners pertaining to the movements using the space. The site of the gallery was thus both a constantly updated archive and a real-time armory, with the banners often being pulled from the walls for use in actions throughout the city before being returned. Photographic and video documentation of such actions was recirculated not only through social-media platforms with the hashtag #decolonizethisplace but also into the space itself in the form of video loops and large-scale photographic murals alongside earlier actions by groups such as G.U.L.F. The centrality of banners to the visual environment of the gallery underscored the importance of this form as an underappreciated artistic medium with its own histories, one typically regarded as instrumental agitprop when considered at all.⁸¹

Several of the actions launched from Artists Space indicate how an “instituent” practice intersects with the four-part trajectory of institutional critique outlined above, and so offer one possible model for what “institutional liberation” could mean at present—including using the resources of one institution to mobilize against another. The first of these actions was the Anti-Columbus Day Tour of 2016, which was repeated one year later. As outlined elsewhere in this issue,⁸² this ongoing campaign has presented the American Museum of Natural History with three demands: that the museum publicly support the renaming of Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples’ Day; that it agree to the removal of the monument to Theodore Roosevelt in front of the museum; and that it participate in the creation of a decolonization commission in order to radically overhaul its curatorial and governance structures as other museums have done.

A second action launched by Decolonize This Place targeted Artis, a nonprofit organization devoted to bringing high-profile art-world figures on tours of the contemporary Israeli art world. First, a letter was hand-delivered to Artis calling for it to adhere to BDS, given that the organization has eschewed any direct government

80. *Decolonize This Place* stickers, with their site-specific indexicality, were an especially popular item, showing up on surfaces throughout the city from cop cars to courthouses to luxury condos, as well as art sites like Maurizio Cattelan’s smug golden toilet at the Guggenheim.

81. As we read in a Decolonize This Place pamphlet distributed at the space, “Banners do much more than communicate a message. They are a choreography of direct action and media circulation. They can be used to create and hold space: physically, visually, and in the public imagination. Whether heading up a march, blockading an intersection, framing the entrance to a park, or affixed to an official structure of power, banners can mark sites of injustice and resistance, and map linkages between such sites. But it is not really about banners. Banners are nothing without the bodies that activate them, and the breath that animates those bodies in turn.”

82. See MTL+, “Response to Questionnaire on Monuments,” pp. 119–33.

funding from Israel. When no response was forthcoming, hundreds of people marched from Artists Space to Artis with their faces covered in the iconic Palestinian keffiyeh, an unsettling sign of militancy coupled with the nonviolent tactic of the boycott. Trailed by dozens of police officers, the marchers held an assembly in front of the Artis building, using the Occupy-era Illuminator van to project the slogan STOP ARTWASHING THE OCCUPATION onto the facade of the building. While the prospect of Artis adopting BDS was unlikely, the action served to highlight and legitimize the campaign in the art system, now with the brand name of Artists Space figuring into the narrative. The action aimed to provoke a conflict within the art system between one avant-garde formation, launched with the support of Artists Space, and another organization, Artis, framed as standing on the wrong side of history.⁸³



Top: Artists Space, August 2016.
Bottom: Artists Space, October 2016.
Photograph by MTL+.

83. Hrag Vartanian, "Over 120 Protestors Ask Artis Nonprofit to Clarify 'Organization's Position by Signing onto BDS,'" *Hyperallergic*, December 11, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/344358/over-120-protesters-ask-artis-nonprofit-to-clarify-organizations-position-by-signing-onto-bds/>.

Decolonize This Place has been enmeshed with ongoing social movements, to which it is accountable, helping to facilitate their connections in an enduring manner. Indeed, following its residency at Artists Space, Decolonize This Place has sustained itself as a movement formation, activating at particular political junctures. One such action occurred in the spring of 2018, when the Brooklyn Museum became the target of popular anger on account of its having hired a white woman as a consulting curator for the museum's extensive African-art collection.⁸⁴ Much commentary on the controversy focused on issues of diversity, hiring, and academic expertise, with prominent figures in the study of African art history coming to the defense of the curator and the museum (and pointedly questioning why the museum's hire of a white man as a photography curator had not generated the same outrage).⁸⁵

From the vantage of Decolonize This Place, however, the stakes of the controversy went far deeper than any single hire, opening onto a set of long-standing grievances concerning the role of the museum in facilitating gentrification and the colonial history of the non-Western objects in the museum's collection. In an open letter to the museum, Decolonize This Place and a coalition of nineteen other groups and organizations (ranging from the Brooklyn Anti-Gentrification Network, Black Youth Project 100, and American Indian Community House to Occupy Museums and W.A.G.E.) argued that the popular anger had "brought to light a major disconnect between the governance of the museum and the communities of Brooklyn who the museum is obliged to serve," and called for the museum to participate in the formation of a decolonization commission to address deeply rooted structural injustices.⁸⁶ When the museum finally issued a statement regarding the controversy, it ignored the call for the decolonization commission, circumscribing the discussion to focus on the infallible credentials of the curator in question, though also acknowledging the need for "diversity in leadership."⁸⁷ The coalition in turn replied that "the crisis currently enveloping the museum cannot be resolved by a deliberation between arts experts, regardless of their background. The controversy around the hire has now given way to public scrutiny of the foundations, the authority, and the governance of the art institution itself."⁸⁸

84. Teju Adisa-Farrar, "Why Are White Curators Still Running Collections of African Art?," *The Guardian*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/03/brooklyn-museum-white-curators-african-art-open-letter>.

85. See especially the remarks by Steven Nelson in Ryan Sit, "Museum Appoints White Woman As African Art Curator, Sparks Outrage," *Newsweek* (March 29, 2018), which would be cited repeatedly by other articles in subsequent weeks.

86. Quoted in Hrag Vartanian, "Coalition of Anti-Gentrification Groups Pressures Brooklyn Museum to 'Decolonize,'" *Hyperallergic*, April 5, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/436293/coalition-of-anti-gentrification-groups-pressure-brooklyn-museum-to-decolonize/>.

87. Maya Salam, "Brooklyn Museum Defends Its Hiring of a White Curator of African Art," *New York Times*, April 6, 2018.

88. Quoted in Hrag Vartanian, "Growing Coalition Calls Brooklyn Museum 'Out of Touch,' and Demands Decolonization Commission," *Hyperallergic*, April 12, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/437542/growing-coalition-calls-brooklyn-museum-out-of-touch-and-demands-decolonization-commission/>.



Lorena Ambrosio of *Decolonize This Place* displays a poster by Kyle Goen/MTL+ during the Anti-Columbus Day Tour at the American Museum of Natural History, October 10, 2016. Courtesy of MTL+.

The call for the museum to participate in a decolonization commission echoed that issued to the American Museum of Natural History. This move was significant. Politically, it called the bluff of those who, in responding to the hiring crisis, deferred to the idea that the art field itself needs to be structurally examined and transformed rather than focusing unfairly on individuals. Symbolically, it short-circuited the apparent distance between two very different kinds of institutions: an antiquated monument to a white-nationalist president, on the one hand, and a cutting-edge, cosmopolitan hub for multicultural Brooklyn on the other. Indeed, as the coalition noted in its letter, the Brooklyn Museum seemed especially ripe for a deep transformation, given the evident presence of radical tendencies already within the institution as exemplified by the *We Wanted a Revolution: Radical*

Black Women, 1965–1985 show held in summer 2017 and *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985* in spring 2018. Beyond diversity in terms of staff and programming, a decolonial perspective enables one to exacerbate the contradictions between such visionary exhibitions and the actual governance of the institution. As Alicia Grullón—whose own work was part of the programming around *Radical Women*—put it during an unauthorized Decolonize This Place assembly inside the museum following a month of silence from the institution, “[The women in this show] saw the contradiction of museums as rational public spaces when the world outside was anything but. They understood we are all still colonized in our minds and imaginations. . . . We are still undergoing the process of becoming human.”⁸⁹

89. Quoted in Hrag Vartanian, “Protestors Occupy Brooklyn Museum Atrium, Demanding Decolonization Commission,” *Hyperallergic*, April 30, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/440426/protesters-occupy-brooklyn-museum-atrium-demanding-decolonization-commission/>.



Jackson Polys leads an assembly in the Northwestern Peoples Hall of the American Museum of Natural History during the second annual Anti-Columbus Day Tour, October 9, 2017. Photograph by Elena Goukassian.

Decolonization Commission

1. Territorial acknowledgement of Indigenous land occupied by this building and giving material effect to such an acknowledgment in curatorial practices, programming, exhibitions, and day-to-day operations.
2. The deep diversification of curatorial staff and executive leadership whereby the lived experience of oppressions — including patriarchy, white supremacy, and poverty — are valued and factored in.
3. A decolonial inventory of colonial-era objects of both African and Indigenous people with a view to settling the long-pursued claims of reparations and repatriation.
4. An upgrade of working conditions and pay of ground staff — who are disproportionately employees of color — in security, food service, and janitorial divisions.
5. The replacement of board president David Berliner and other trustees who are real estate tycoons with a broad cross-section of artists and community organizers.
6. The undertaking of a de-gentrification initiative to examine and mitigate the museum's role in boosting land value and rents in the borough.
7. An institutional commitment to address the issues raised by the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (bds) movement in recognition of Brooklynites' role in the settler movement in Palestine.

Decolonize
This Museum

Kyle Goen/MTL+. Front and back covers of Decolonize This Place pamphlet, distributed at the Brooklyn Museum, April 29, 2018.

Whatever the ultimate fate of calls for decolonization commissions at major museums, we are at a moment when the principles of institutional critique are being pushed to a breaking point and opening onto something radically new and radically old at the same time. As *Decolonize This Place* put it in a pamphlet distributed at the museum, “An innovative show here, a progressive event there . . . are not enough. The institution must be questioned in its very foundations, starting with the fact that it sits on occupied Lenape land and contains thousands of objects collected through imperial plunder. Why not make these starting points for a discussion, rather than the question of who curates what department? What would it mean to liberate this institution from the structures of oppression that are built into it from the beginning?”⁹⁰

90. *Decolonize This Museum* pamphlet distributed at the Brooklyn Museum, April 29, 2018.