Museums and Public Art?
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

#MUSEUMSRESPOND:
SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE ENGAGED MUSEUM

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This essay traces the evolution of a conversation about museums and social justice as it occurred in the virtual and physical spaces of museums, galleries and social media since 2014, highlighting two initiatives that set precedents for using museums as sites of social engagement. It takes as its starting point an online dialogue born in response to the fatal shooting of an unarmed young African American man, Michael Brown, by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, and the ensuing protests (after the shooting and again after the officer’s acquittal in November of that year). Public historian Aleia Brown and museum blogger Adrianne Russell used a Twitter hashtag, #museumsrespondtoferguson, to urge museums to rethink their public roles in ongoing nationwide struggles for social justice and to generate ideas for programming and community engagement. Aleia Brown, Russell and 14 other colleagues issued a statement in December 2014 explaining that all museums, “as mediators of culture” and “irrespective of collection, focus or mission,” should commit to identifying how they can connect to contemporary issues and “not only ‘respond’ but ‘invest’ in conversations and partnerships that call out inequity and racism and commit to positive change.” 1 It is not the purpose of this essay to survey all the ways that cultural institutions across the country conceived their roles in response to pressing social inequities but rather, by focusing upon two case studies, show how museum professionals shared ideas with a wider community of activists, artists, historians and concerned individuals, and to attempt to frame these collaborations in the context of museums’ relationships to public art practice.

#museumsrespondtoferguson “Twitter chats” moderated by Aleia Brown and Russell (on the third Wednesday of every month) extended engagement in the topic far beyond the standard timeframe of a museum
exhibition or public program. Anybody with a Twitter account can sign in at the designated time to follow along or converse by tweeting commentary and ideas related to the monthly topic. Brown and Russell hosted the second anniversary of their #museumsrespondtoferguson Twitter chat on 15 December 2016. These virtual forums (and others like them) sparked programs that continue to evolve as ideas circulate among chats, blogs and digital art projects, as well as the physical spaces of museums, galleries, community centers and classrooms. “The Art of Black Dissent,” a pop-up exhibition and dialogue based museum program organized in 2016 by La Tanya S. Autry (the Marcia Brady Tucker Fellow) and Gabriella Svenningsen Omonte (Museum Assistant), both of the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art at Yale University Art Gallery, is one such project. Mike Murawski, Director of Education and Public Programs at the Portland Art Museum, has come to believe that “[e]mbracing a digital mindset of openness, participation, and connectivity allows museums the chance to extend the boundaries of what is possible.”

Autry is an art historian and museum professional who has adopted such a mindset to help put her expertise to use in promoting “the central role of visual culture in articulating, challenging, and dismantling racial bias.”

Autry is a regular contributor to several social media platforms, using the digital handle Artstuffmatters. In her personal blog she acknowledged the influence that #museumsrespondtoferguson has had on her programming ideas for the Yale University Art Gallery. As “The Art of Black Dissent” was becoming a reality in January 2016 Autry wrote:

In December 2014 my involvement with the #museumsrespondtoferguson initiative on Twitter encouraged me to brainstorm actions that art museums could institute to engage issues of racial inequities in the U.S. One of my ideas centers on designing programming that highlights the role of visual culture in the African-American liberation struggle. Fortunately this proposal is coming to life. On April 29th along with my colleague Gabriella Svenningsen Omonte, I will co-lead The Art of Black Dissent at Yale University Art Gallery. This program spotlights black protest art in the Gallery’s collection and current images circulating on the streets and via social media platforms in concert with the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

As early as December 2014, during one of the monthly #museumsrespondtoferguson Twitter chats, Autry tweeted: “Art #museums can also be a forum setting, can also tie political art/visual culture in collections to current events.” A couple of days earlier she had tweeted: “Started talking w/ my boss & colleagues re: #museumsrespondtoferguson
—Hoping to co-organize a forum or workshop.” With the encouragement of Brown and Russell’s Twitter conversations the seeds for “The Art of Black Dissent” had been planted.

“The Art of Black Dissent” was far from “a business as usual” museum exhibition or public program, and Autry’s “digital mindset”—her openness to connecting with museum professionals and social activists through Twitter and other social media—guided her commitment to forging this innovative program. Autry and Omonte, however, are equally committed to face-to-face conversations on the topic of visual culture’s role in promoting change, and Autry participates in conferences and facilitates workshops focused upon how to broaden the scope and deepen the effectiveness of programs about art and social justice. In addition to working at the Yale University Art Gallery, Omonte (who is an illustrator) was an artist-in-residence in 2016 at the Fair Haven Branch of the New Haven Free Public Library where she held workshops for kids, many of whom had little previous exposure to art and art making. “These workshops are crucial,” Omonte says, “to awaken an interest in art and visual culture at an early age.”

On “The Art of Black Dissent” blog, Autry and Omonte credit Sites of Conscience, an international coalition of museums and historical sites, for the Yale program’s dialogue based method:

After attending one of [the Sites of Conscience training] sessions at the National Council on Public History [conference] in March, we realized that the Sites of Conscience Arc of Dialogue paradigm would help us create the environment of deep reflecting and sharing of experiences about both the formal and social content of the artworks and the pressing social and political issues of today.

The free online guide Front Page Dialogues: Race and Policing was instrumental to us as we developed our questions and organized the flow of our program. The process of building questions according to the 4 phases of the Sites of Conscience model was rigorous. The format helped us see the artworks and museum visitors as social changemakers.

“The Art of Black Dissent” thus relied on in-person discussions and interactions to add a new dimension to what started as a social media phenomenon. Amelia Wong (American Studies scholar and museum social media manager) notes that museum efforts to affect change through a digital platform may “provoke polarized rather than productive discussions” because this platform is “often experienced under conditions of anonymity and only through text.” Within their premises, by contrast, “museums can create ‘safe spaces’ for discussion, utilizing facilitators and
rules for civil discussion that produce promising results in promoting critical thinking, empathy, and appreciation for different views." Creating such a space was precisely the aim of “The Art of Black Dissent” and participating in #museumsrespondtoferguson Twitter chats contributed to making it a reality. Furthermore Autry and Omonte’s efforts to share and update information about the program on digital platforms (including “The Art of Black Dissent” blog) gives their process full transparency. Anyone hoping to organize a similar pop-up exhibition can consult the above blog for bibliography, images, advice for the facilitation of dialogue, links to resources, and comments from participants.

“The Art of Black Dissent” exhibition was open by appointment for school groups starting in April 2016, and was also open to the public on one single Friday afternoon as a drop-in program. At the time of this writing Autry and Omonte had facilitated programs for four college student groups and one high school class, and had led one large drop-in session, which consisted primarily of “regular museum visitors and arts professionals.” Additionally they adapted the program to bring it to New Haven libraries and public schools with funding from the Connecticut Office for the Arts in partnership with the Arts Council of Greater New Haven, fulfilling their goal of connecting with a broader cross-section of the local population. “Many people of color and low income residents of New Haven do not visit the gallery,” Autry explained. “We’re hoping to engage them by going where they are…[W]e’re only getting started.” During the spring and summer of 2017 they held “The Art of Black Dissent” pop-up exhibitions and dialogues at New Haven Academy Public School (March), the New Haven Free Public Library and the Institute Library (April), and Metropolitan Business Academy Public School (May).

The pop-up exhibition at Yale’s Art Gallery consisted of 13 works from the Gallery’s collection (prints, photographs and artists books), along with ephemera from the facilitators’ personal collections, and a digital presentation of examples of contemporary visual popular culture culled from the Internet and the street. Photographic selections included a James Van Der Zee image of a crowded New York City street during a 1924 Marcus Garvey rally. It also featured images by photojournalists W. Eugene Smith and Charles Moore of, respectively, Ku Klux Klan members burning a cross in 1951, and children on the fire hose drenched streets of Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. Other works ranged from Elizabeth Catlett’s 1947 linocut My role has been important in the struggle to organize the unorganized, to a 1952 watercolor study by John Woodrow Wilson for a mural featuring a lynching scene, to artist books by
Howardena Pindel and Adrian Piper, and to collages titled *Panthers* and *Stokely #2* made in 2011 by Rico Gatson. The exhibition checklist enabled visitors to draw connections between historical eras, comparing visual strategies and, in particular, contrasting different artistic approaches to inspiring social change. The show prompted questions about the efficacy of distinct artistic media, formats, styles and subjects for communicating ideas and reaching audiences. Its design sparked conversations about the advantages and disadvantages of ideologically and stylistically didactic art versus art with a less specific agenda, spurring debates over the power and limitations of social documentary photography and its uses. As a dialogue based program its objectives focused upon making the visitors active participants. Autry and Omonte, among other things, encouraged participants to link historical and contemporary images and events, asking them to discuss and share how black protest art and racism related to their lives today (Figure 13.1).13

The founders of #museumsrespondtoferguson had urged museums to consider what they could do and how they could use their resources to serve their communities. Autry and Omonte’s exhibition provided what museums are in a unique position to offer as stewards of cultural heritage: precedents for today’s Black Lives Matter movement and visual culture of protest, and the historical knowledge and analytical skills to lead discussions that provide meaningful lessons based upon those precedents. By drawing upon their considerable art historical and artistic expertise and dedicating themselves to learning dialogue facilitation methods, Autry and Omonte attempted to do what critic Holland Cotter writes most museums do not—though they could and should: take a truth-telling approach that is “factual, incisive, politically astute” and that “connect[s] the past to the present” and “invite[s] argument.”14 The objects in Autry and Omonte’s pop-up exhibition were not displayed on gallery walls but instead were propped up on a seminar table in a study room for each hour-long program, allowing for intimate viewing and extended reflection among small groups of participants.15 The show also incorporated images from “street art, print culture—magazines, zines, and comic books, and social media spaces.” Autry and Omonte noticed that these were the images “younger participants in general have often focused on.”16 These were also more portable than most objects from Yale’s collection (which require climate control and security); thus they are the ones Autry and Omonte took to schools and libraries in New Haven. Their personal collections of photographs, prints, posters and other art and ephemera continue to grow. As of this writing, plans were being made to split the collections so the program can continue even after Autry moves to Mississippi for a new job
as curator of Art and Civil Rights at the Mississippi Museum of Art and Tougaloo College.

Museum exhibitions are slowly following the trajectory of recent developments in other types of dialogue based public art. As art historian Grant Kester noted in *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2013), over the last 30 years “the creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange” surpassed the importance of a tangible end product in much public art practice and “conversation became an integral part of the works themselves.” He calls such art projects “dialogical.” The artwork is “reframed,” Kester writes, “as an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse, and the perceived inevitability of partisan political conflict.” While the projects he writes about (by artists such as Suzanne Lacy, Stephen Willats, and Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle) have roots in 1960s and 70s conceptual art, they are “located in cultural contexts associated with activism and policy formation.” Activism also informs Autry and Omonte’s exhibition and dialogue based program. In May 2016 Autry, in conversation with public historian Kathleen Hulser, tweeted a response: “A student said that my museum programming ideas sound like organizing. Me: Score!” Kester focuses on art that largely exists outside of museums and galleries. Museums as public venues for art, however, are now also placing greater emphasis on conversation and exchange.

Within the fields of museum and education studies, scholars call this emphasis on conversation and community collaboration “shared authority.” Guest editor Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello introduces the essays in the July 2013 issue of the *Journal of Museum Education* by stating that “the notion of shared authority—at times with the general public, at times with colleagues at a non-museum partner—[is] critical to [museums’] ability to address challenging and/or contemporary social concerns.” She and the respective contributors see shared authority as a means to serve the public good and tackle contested social issues. Moreover this idea of networked knowledge (or “collective intelligence”) complements a new acceptance on the part of museum professionals of the benefits of digital tools in museum settings. “With the web has come a new collaborative approach to knowledge generation and sharing [and] a recognition of multiple perspectives,” as Graham Beck writes in *Transforming Museums in the 21st Century*. The format of “The Art of Black Dissent” served as a kind of anchor, filter and facilitator for ideas and images from multiple sources, including digital ones—many from outside the museum. The works could only be viewed by appointment or by attending the scheduled drop-in program, which encouraged visitors to take their time and deliberate. The program was structured to encourage participants to think deeply about selected artworks and their relationships to recent history and personal
experiences. After all, as Cotter writes, “art isn’t just about objects—it’s about ideas, histories, and ethical philosophies that [a museum visitor] may have a stake in, and an opinion about. It seems to me that the point of museum programming is to get people to think, as opposed to endlessly snapping selfies.” Autry and Omonte’s project at Yale provides a good example of innovative programming that can encourage people to think at the nexus of museum spaces, digital communities and social activism, however, it is not the only one.

What follows here is not a comprehensive chronology of recent violent crimes against unarmed black men and subsequent police acquittals, but a summary of a few of the more publicized incidents in the years just before and after Ferguson to better understand the context for #museumsrespondtoferguson. The July 2013 acquittal of Michael Zimmerman, the man who shot unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, was the incident that initially sparked the Black Lives Matter movement. The following year, on 17 July 2014, an unarmed black man named Eric Garner suffocated to death after being put in a chokehold and forcibly restrained during an arrest by white officers on Staten Island, New York (for the minor infraction of selling loose cigarettes). The police shooting of Michael Brown on 9 August 2014 in Ferguson took place less than a month after Garner’s death. Then police shot and killed 12-year-old Tamir Rice for drawing a toy gun in a park in Cleveland, Ohio, on 22 November 2014. The acquittal of the Ferguson officer was announced just two days later on 24 November 2014, and the acquittal of the officer involved in Garner’s death was announced on 3 December 2014. The death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore on 12 April 2015, and the racially motivated murder of nine people during a prayer service at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, on 17 June 2015, further built upon the frustration and despair. This string of violent and racially motivated incidents and failures of justice prompted another statement by the #museumsrespondtoferguson moderators. In a September 2015 online essay titled “Museums and #BlackLivesMatter,” Aleia Brown and Adrianne Russell asked why museums “continually hesitate” to respond to “Ferguson and Baltimore and Staten Island and Cleveland and Charleston and…,” suggesting that museums are not ready to connect with communities in meaningful ways until they address the marginalization of minorities on their own staffs and boards. Despite Twitter’s relative accessibility as a democratic social media platform and its proven effectiveness at prompting change, Brown and Russell noted the problems that many users had in moving “out of an online space and into a space of action.” Tellingly, when #museumsrespondtoferguson held a
Wednesday chat specifically about anti-racism initiatives at participants’ institutions, contributions to the conversation were limited. As Brown observed: “Instead of seeing action, that particular chat pulled back a veneer and exposed fear and tepid hopes. After several chats it seemed as if participants were still unsure about how to respond to Ferguson.” Her comments appear to validate Amelia Wong’s observation that “social media’s capacity to support productive discussion is, as yet, underwhelming” and that “the democratizing and transformative effects of social media are ambiguous.” Though low Twitter chat participation need not reflect the actual state of museum initiatives, the people actively engaged in #museumsrespondtoferguson ultimately had few actions to report and share with their online colleagues.

One nonprofit art space, Smack Mellon, in Brooklyn, New York, responded effectively to the verdict in the Eric Garner trial. Director Kathleen Gilrain approached the gallery’s artists-in-residence just a few days after the grand jury’s failure to indict Daniel Pantaleo (the Staten Island officer tried in the case) with a proposal to curate an exhibition expressing dissatisfaction with the verdict and supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. Dread Scott, one of the artists-in-residence at the time, remembers:

I, and the other residents, were excited about this, and thought that it was exactly what an art space should be doing and were happy to participate. I was almost literally in tears when [Gilrain] said that this is what she and [Smack Mellon] wanted to do. It was so on time and something that should be more the norm in the arts, but is sadly far too much the exception. Beyond shows not being this topical in the arts generally, the timing, including asking scheduled artists to move their exhibition and rearranging the schedule, is very unusual.

To make an immediate statement in the wake of the grand jury’s decision not to indict Pantaleo, Gilrain asked artists Erica Bailey and Michael Kukla to postpone their already scheduled programming. The brochure for “Respond,” the subsequent exhibition that evolved from this initiative, included a special thanks to them along with the dates of their rescheduled shows.

Scott stresses the collaborative nature of the planning process for the “Respond” exhibition. There was an open call on the Internet soliciting art, and resident artists also asked people whom they thought would have important work to contribute:
It was collaborative in many ways in that all the artists who wanted to participate had to want to take on this issue and it was not just “have a show in a NY art space.” They were taking responsibility for addressing this hugely important question in society. The resident artists and Kathleen and the other [Smack Mellon] staff had several conversations about what the show should be, how to bring in a few artists who were important but not yet committed, how to assemble such a massive show, how to “curate” the works and decide what works didn’t really address the theme but allowing for a wide interpretation of how people might address it, etc. We also discussed how the programming, including with community groups, was essential to the exhibition. It wasn’t just a visual show, as important as that was.29

The resident artists who collaborated with Smack Mellon staff in planning the exhibition and its programming were Scott, Esteban del Valle, Molly Dilworth, Oasa DuVerney, Ira Eduardovna, and Steffani Jemison. Together they selected 200 out of more than 600 submitted proposals. The works were hung salon style in Smack Mellon’s towering two-level gallery space, a short walk from all major New York City subway lines running through downtown Brooklyn.

Smack Mellon is within walking distance from the institution where I teach, St. Francis College, a historically Franciscan college of under 3000 students, located in Brooklyn Heights. I gave an assignment to two sections of my American Art class: “respond to ‘Respond’” by answering questions and blogging. Seventy students visited the exhibition on their own time, chose works to examine and answer questions about, and reflected upon the feelings, memories, thoughts and/or actions the show inspired. Though “Respond” gallery didactics were sparse—with titles relegated to laminated lists keyed to numbered artworks, and a selection of artists’ statements in a binder at the gallery entrance—the exhibition communicated its purpose powerfully. One student described it as addressing:

the overwhelming issue of racial injustice and how this racism leads to violence. Throughout the exhibition, there’s a thread connecting current events to the past, emphasizing the historical continuity of police brutality and the long history of racism in America. This exhibition is a call for acknowledgment and change.30

In summarizing their responses to the show, many students wrote that “Respond” contributed to their understandings of the historical precedents for the Brown and Garner cases, and highlighted the continuity and persistence of discrimination and police violence against African Americans.
Figure 13.2: Hank Willis Thomas. *Two Little Prisoners*. 2014. Glass mirror and silver. 65 1/8 x 49 1/16 x 1 1/2 inches (framed). One of the artworks featured in “Respond” at Smack Mellon. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.
Some chose to write about Hank Willis Thomas’ *Two Little Prisoners* (2014), which features a photograph of two boys arrested during the 1965 Watts Riots in Los Angeles (printed on a mirror so viewers see the two boys superimposed upon their own reflections; Figure 13.2). Prior awareness of precedents like Watts varied among students. One reflected: “I had no idea that there were hundreds of incidents already that have taken place in the United States that took many young African American lives due to injustice.” Several wrote about Dread Scott’s *Sign of the Times*, which was made in response to the shooting death of 23-year-old Amadou Diallo by police officers in the Bronx in 1999. Scott’s piece, a yellow road sign emblazoned with the words “Danger Police in Area,” had appeared first as an image on t-shirts and prints beginning in 1999 and then again as a wheat pasted version in a few locations in New York City in 2001. An actual street sign such as the one displayed at Smack Mellon was installed on a Fort Greene, Brooklyn, street in May 2003, at the site of another police killing. Police removed the sign in 2003 but the powerful image continues to be printed on t-shirts and posters becoming, as one student wrote, “more popular now than it was in the 1990s.”

“Respond” also conveyed to students the complexity of discrimination and police violence; many acknowledged having mixed feelings about the images in the show and the ideas these raise. Students wrote that they experienced anger, sadness, grief, helplessness and hope while visiting Smack Mellon. More than one wrote of being moved to tears. For some students the cumulative effect of the artworks elicited fear and concern for the future of family members, and in one case sparked memories of a brother’s death. A small percentage of students (at least one with a relative in law enforcement) sympathized with the officers, and some admitted to feeling at a loss: “If we say the police are at fault all the time, the police will be deterred from doing their job when we actually need them. If we say civilians are at fault, we wrongly conclude the police are always right. But how can we fix this?” One student observed: “Seeing these images makes me feel sort of helpless but at the same time a part of something that’s bigger than myself.” And yet another wrote: “It is good to question and be in conflict, therefore galleries like these are important.”

Students also appreciated the opportunity Smack Mellon provided to discuss their feelings and reactions to the artworks. More than one student had the chance to meet Dread Scott and talk with him about the show. “Each work displayed a unique image and story,” one student reflected. “[The exhibit] started a lively conversation among the visitors in the gallery.” Still others attended performances, collaborative exercises and screenings (Figure 13.3):
I was immediately drawn to the performance that was going on in the middle of the room....The four girls performing were not only amazing dancers, but at the same time, they were telling a story and sending a message. In addition, a bunch of other young teenagers came out and put on another powerful show, sending out the message relating to the whole theme of the exhibition, stressing that black lives matter. The members of this organization at the gallery did several exercises that everyone engaged in...For one of them, we would all gather in a circle and say one feeling we had after watching the performances. I was just so inspired by everything and how all of these young people were coming together to make their voices heard.37


The same student stayed to view the exhibition, and even watched a screening of the 2015 PBS documentary Through a Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People. She was not alone in commenting upon how “Respond” increased her awareness of different kinds of protests and actions being undertaken by artists and community groups. The gallery talks, performances, workshops and screenings that St. Francis College students encountered at Smack Mellon were only a small number of the programs hosted there during the exhibition’s run. As stated in the “Respond” brochure, Smack Mellon’s 5000-square-foot gallery was
“provided to community organizers, activists, artists, writers, and performers to organize, collaborate, speak, perform, teach, lead and act.” The resident artists and Smack Mellon staff who collaborated on planning the exhibition and attendant programs thus addressed one of the calls to action outlined in the December 2014 statement issued by the moderators of #museumsrespondtoferguson and their colleagues: they urged museums to look to their communities, offer their auditoriums as meeting places, join local initiatives, and support civic groups to organize workshops or public conversations.

The sense of urgency communicated in part by Smack Mellon’s decision to postpone its scheduled exhibitions for “Respond,” and in part by the power of the displayed artworks, was not lost on student visitors. One piece in particular underscored the phenomenon of societal amnesia and how quickly contemporary events become “yesterday’s news.” Artist Gautam Kansara was represented in the exhibition by a t-shirt printed with the faded leading story from the 4 December 2014 New York Times, “New York Officer Facing No Charges in Chokehold Case.” The silkscreened newspaper page “looked like an old image but it was only taken a few months ago,” one student wrote, which “helped me see how easily things can be overlooked and forgotten, and until we have a reaction, change won’t come.” Another wrote that Kansara’s piece related to the theme of the exhibit by urging visitors “to respond and respond now not later because we will forget.”

Whether or not Gilrain and Smack Mellon’s resident artists were as directly engaged with #museumsrespondtoferguson as the co-organizers of “The Art of Black Dissent,” “Respond” nonetheless effectively furthered that initiative’s aims. Gilrain used the resources available to her as director of Smack Mellon: the talents, energies and connections of her resident artists; the high profile of an established art gallery in Brooklyn; and the physical space of the gallery itself to “respond to the continued failure of the United States to protect its black citizens from police discrimination and violence.” Smack Mellon also framed its exhibition as part of the wider Black Lives Matter movement, itself initiated by a Twitter hashtag in response to Michael Zimmerman’s 2013 acquittal in the Trayvon Martin murder trial. The “Respond” exhibition brochure stated that “Smack Mellon’s gallery space will be used to present events, performances and artworks that affirm that black lives matter, express frustration and anger with the institutional racism that enables law enforcement to kill black members of the community with impunity, and imagine creative solutions and visionary alternatives to a broken justice system.” Moreover the call for artworks that solicited 600 submissions from artists around the country
and beyond never would have been possible on such short notice without the use of digital networks. Thus the same kinds of social media that spread the urgency of the Black Lives Matter movement also helped make “Respond” possible, and disseminated information about the exhibition once it was installed. And the students from St. Francis College (among other visitors) perpetuated the dialogue by posting photographs of works in the exhibition and writing about what they saw on blogs and social media.40

The two case studies described in this essay were not conceived as public art projects according to conventional ideas of public art as something that is located in the public sphere accessible to everyone without cost or without the implied authority of the museum or gallery space. Yet both made art within museum walls more public by asking visitors to draw upon their own experiences of visual culture, and by using the gallery spaces for public dialogue. As critic Patricia Phillips emphasized in her seminal 1989 *Artforum* essay, “Out of Order: the Public Art Machine”: “the fact remains that the public dimension is a psychological rather than a physical or environmental construct.”41 “The Art of Black Dissent” and “Respond” also demonstrate how museums and galleries can further their civic missions by remaining open to digital technology and the possibility of networked conversations enhancing face-to-face exchanges. As Wong wrote in “Social Media Towards Social Change”:

Over time, interface designs will change, new features will arise, new devices will emerge, and people’s attitudes and uses of social media will continue to evolve. In this process, how museums best advance equality, diversity, and social justice through social media remains ambiguous but also promising….While social media may effect change towards more open, equitable and just societies, whether they will—and to what extent—remains up to us. Thus, to figure out how they can do so at all requires continued experimentation.42

The art historians, artists, arts administrators, educators, bloggers, Twitter moderators and community members who collaborated on “The Art of Black Dissent” and “Respond” have taken on this challenge outlined by Wong. As art historian Cher Krause Knight proposes, “[a] museum becomes most fully public when it prompts us to examine our aesthetic tastes, cultural beliefs, and social practices, and when a variety of visitors feel comfortable and properly equipped to actively partake in such investigations” and when it “entertains issues of collective consequence.”43 It is precisely this conception of “collective consequence” that social media can nurture, and in so doing, help make museums sites of public art.
Notes


7 Gabriella Svenningsen Omonte, email to the author, 27 May 2016.

8 Autry and Omonte, “Making a Dialogue-Centered Program.”


10 La Tanya Autry, email to the author, 13 May and 23 May 2016.


12 The rally was one of the yearly parades of Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) that took place in Harlem, New York. Founded in 1914, the UNIA was a fraternal reform association dedicated to establishing educational and industrial opportunities for African Americans.

13 As stated in the excerpt from “The Art of Black Dissent” blog, the process of building four phases of questioning was rigorous and based upon the Sites of Conscience model. For the opening phase participants worked in groups to share their answers to the question: “What does black protest art mean to you?” Autry also credits Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999) with informing their questioning strategies. Autry, email to the author, 24 May 2016.

Autry first “viewed the room’s spatial limitations as a disadvantage. …but then realized the smaller size would be best. We want each person to have a chance to speak and be heard.” Autry, email to the author, 24 May 2016.


For more information about “dialogical” public art (sometimes called “social practice art” or “cooperative art”) see Tom Finkelpearl, What We Made: Conversations About Art and Social Cooperation (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); and Nato Thompson, Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2015). For how museums are adapting “the dynamism of public art to their own purposes” see the discussion of Hilde Hein’s writing on museums in Cher Krause Knight, Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 49-50.


Ongoing discussion of inequity in museum work led to the formation of a Twitter chat focused on museum labor practices, #museumworkersspeak.


Wong, 288.

Dread Scott, email to the author, 18 May 2016.

Scott, email to the author, 18 May 2016.

Student assignment, February 2016, American Art class. Completion rate was high because the assignment counted as a take-home portion of the midterm exam for both classes.


Dread Scott, email to the author, 16 December 2016.

Student assignment, February 2015, American Art class.
Student blog post, “‘Respond’ or ‘Reply’, which shall you give?,” 26 February 2015, accessed 1 May 2016, https://fa1420amart.wordpress.com/2015/02/26/respond-or-reply-which-shall-you-give/.

Student assignments, February 2016, American Art class.

Student assignments, February 2016, American Art class.


These quotes are from completed student assignments. For another student response to this artwork see the student blog post, “Respond,” 26 February 2015, accessed 1 May 2016, https://americanartsfc.wordpress.com/2015/02/26/respond/.

“Respond” exhibition brochure, January 2015.

Beck, 6.


Wong, 290.

Knight, 52, 62.

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