

RESISTANCE AND REFUSAL

The diverse works gathered in this gallery demonstrate how American artists in the mid-twentieth century used ideas of resistance and refusal to reject inherited policies, politics, and social norms. For some, like Toyo Miyatake, the very act of making art was a form of disobedience. He documented his internment after smuggling camera parts into the camp in Manzanar, California, where he and other Japanese Americans were held during World War II. For Larry Fink, photographing the beatniks during the 1950s gave visibility to a population that formed its identity in opposition to a conformist cultural mainstream. Other projects, like those by Louis H. Draper and Gordon Parks, recorded the efforts of those fighting against racist politics and policies for the fundamental right to be part of society. Ad Reinhardt, working in the aftermath of World War II, defined his art mainly by what it was *not*. His black paintings were “non-objective, timeless, spaceless, changeless, relationless, disinterested.” Although described in aesthetic terms, Reinhardt’s disavowal can also be seen as a stand against the heroic cultural ideology that led to repression and war.

STRIKE, BOYCOTT, ADVOCATE: THE WHITNEY ARCHIVES

Gathering archival material from 1960 to 1971, the presentation in this gallery examines moments of collective, artist-led engagement with the Whitney, as well as frequent opposition to it. During the war in Vietnam and the fight for civil and women's rights, museums increasingly became sites of political action and protest. No longer seen as immune to the social struggles of the day, they were viewed by artists as symptoms of the larger culture's ills or, at the very least, mirrors of its values. From disputes over the curatorial direction of the Museum to demands that it be more inclusive and accessible, artists have shaped the course of the Whitney and continue to do so today.

SPACES AND PREDICAMENTS

This gallery creates a dialogue between two sculptures by artists who chose personal, oblique, and allusive means to question how social spaces are made, engaged, and controlled. Although working abstractly, Senga Nengudi and Melvin Edwards explore how space can be considered in relation to gender and race. Made from nylon hosiery, a material that strongly suggests skin, Nengudi's *Internal I* (1977) evokes the resilience and fragility of the female body upon entering—and being defined by—society. Its bilaterally symmetrical form calls to mind a human figure that has been brutally stretched and flayed. Constructed from barbed wire, Edwards's *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid* (1969) was included in his one-person exhibition at the Whitney in 1970. The work's material connotes prisons, animal pens, and physical pain within the vocabulary of minimal sculpture. The artist David Hammons remarked of Edwards's work in the 1970 Whitney exhibition: "That was the first abstract piece of art that I saw that had cultural value in it for Black people. I couldn't believe that piece when I saw it because I didn't think you could make abstract art with a message." Edwards himself said: "All systems have proven to be inadequate. I am now assuming that there are no limits and even if there are I can give no guarantees that they will contain my spirit and its search for a way to modify the spaces and predicaments in which I find myself."

STOP THE WAR

According to the National Archives, there were 58,220 American military casualties during the war in Vietnam. The number of Vietnamese military and civilian deaths has been estimated at one to three million. Opposition to the war, which had started on college campuses in the early 1960s, was catalyzed largely by protests. In the earliest major demonstration, on October 21, 1967, nearly 100,000 protesters gathered in Washington, DC. By 1970, two-thirds of Americans believed military engagement in Vietnam had been a mistake.

Posters were essential tools of education and persuasion in the antiwar movement. Produced rapidly and often distributed at no charge, they appeared on placards, in public spaces, and on the walls of college dorm rooms. Like Internet memes today, they combined image and text in compelling, graphically innovative ways; they were lacerating in their critique and often brimmed with satire and gallows humor. The Whitney recently acquired a significant collection of posters related to the movement, a selection of which is presented here for the first time.

In addition to calling for direct political action, artists made singular works that addressed the war in Vietnam. Edward Kienholz's *The Non War Memorial* (1970) simulates the carnage with sand-stuffed military uniforms scattered on the floor as if they are corpses. Nancy Spero brings the conflict home through her powerful and elegiac work *Hours of the Night* (1974), the title of which is borrowed from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. Allusive and poetic, with texts referencing a fire in her apartment alongside torture in Vietnam, the work suggests how the war crept into every corner of American life.

NO IDLE GESTURE

Beginning in the 1960s, the feminist movement grew increasingly vocal and influential. Advocating for the legal and social rights of women, it addressed reproductive freedom, domestic and sexual violence, and the family, among other pressing concerns. This gallery focuses on feminist explorations of labor, whether in the home or workplace.

The slogan “the personal is political” became both rallying cry and directive in this period for many artists, both male and female, who often used video and photography to give visibility to their lived experiences. Suzanne Lacy and Martha Rosler employ absurdity and humor to suggest that meaning and gendered roles are socially constructed. In her *Free, White and 21* (1980), Howardena Pindell details her experiences with racism and sexism in both the feminist movement and in jobs, calling attention to the specific mental and emotional labor required of people of color in white-dominated spaces. Since the 1980s, the Guerrilla Girls have unmasked the unequal status of women as art workers and fought for the inclusion of women and people of color in major art institutions. Their protest is ongoing.

MOURNING AND MILITANCY

During the 1980s and 1990s, AIDS and complications from it killed nearly half a million people in the United States, a disproportionate number of them gay men and people of color. AIDS became one of the most searing issues in American life and politics. The artistic community lost thousands; still more friends, lovers, and family members faced lives transformed by grief, fear, indignation, and illness. The activist and critic Douglas Crimp argued that both “mourning and militancy” were required to address the AIDS crisis.

Many artists made activist work that criticized government inaction, promoted awareness and treatment, and expressed support for people fighting and living with the virus. Frequently adopting the visual strategies of previous protest movements, artists mobilized against AIDS by deploying a sophisticated understanding of media culture, advertising, and product branding. Their widely distributed posters, artworks, and graphics were often used at marches and rallies or were posted on the street.

In a different mode, AA Bronson’s billboard-size portrait of his friend and collaborator Felix Partz transforms a private image into a public statement. Partz is pictured just a few hours after his death from AIDS-related complications. By making viewers confront the image of someone who lived with AIDS and the rawness of his death, Bronson uses the memorial form to protest the magnitude of the crisis. As we continue to live with such loss, and AIDS still affects individuals and communities in the United States and globally, the rallying cry of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) resounds today: the AIDS crisis is not over.

THE USABLE PAST

Rather than relying on a single social issue as its organizing principle, this gallery gathers artworks largely made after 2000 that evoke the “usable past”—the concept that a self-conscious examination of historical figures, moments, and symbols can shape current and future political formation. Many artists today are looking to the past to understand their present as well as to explore the possibilities, and the possible failure, of collective action. While some of the artworks demonstrate how memory can inform models of protest and activism now, others reveal how nostalgia can make it difficult to move forward. A 2005 film by Josephine Meckseper, on view in the exhibition’s entry, documents protests against the war in Iraq. By using Super 8 film, a format released in 1965, Meckseper imbues a contemporary action with a 1960s aesthetic. The film suggests both that yesterday’s counterculture can become today’s style and that we can learn from the past to address the needs of the present.

While initially resembling a purely abstract painting, Mark Bradford’s *Constitution III* (2013) contains excerpts from the United States Constitution. His embedding of this language within an aggressively worked surface suggests that the founding document is also a living one, subject to modification and debate. Similarly, Julie Mehretu’s *Epigraph, Damascus* (2016) embraces abstraction to convey content about the present. Under a swirl of black lines, the artist depicts architectural drawings of historic buildings in the Syrian capital, the center of a civil war since 2011. Presenting a place that is being transformed by violence, her work asks: Are we seeing buildings that are now gone? Could intervention have prevented this calamity? What do we learn from crisis?

ABUSE OF POWER

In the 1990s, artists witnessed the persistence of racialized violence in American society and responded with newfound urgency. Two groundbreaking and controversial exhibitions at the Whitney, the 1993 Biennial and *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (1994), tackled this issue directly. The Museum acquired the works on view here by Mel Chin and Carl Pope after they were shown in *Black Male*. Purposefully confrontational, the artists and their artworks speak unapologetically about painful aspects of American history and question state-sanctioned systems of authority. These works are exhibited here with the understanding that this history of systemic violence is not past. For many Americans, it is all too well known and personally felt.