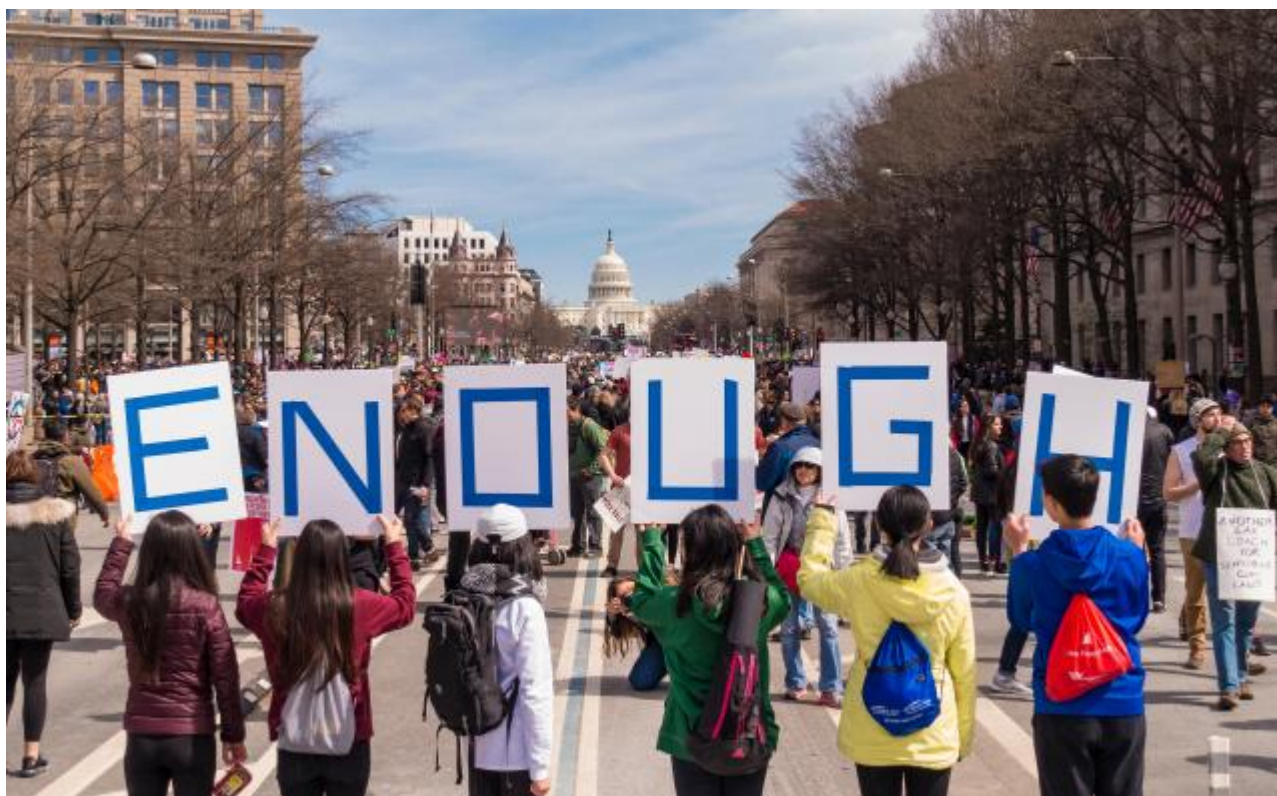


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Art and the First Amendment

Five Works Essential to the History of American Protest



March for Our Lives protest against gun violence, Washington, DC, 24 March 2018. Photo credit: Alamy

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It's official: we live in an era of *yuge* discord. Whether it's high school students rallying in opposition to gun violence, African-Americans demonstrating against police brutality, women marching against sexual misconduct or conservative whites massing in defense of Confederate monuments, the country has arrived at a moment without precedent in its history—call it the age of protest.

Though less violent, to date, than the demonstrations of the Vietnam era, more people are rallying in the street than at any other time in American history, according to British newspaper *The Guardian*. It recently published estimates from the Crowd Counting Consortium and Count Love, which estimate overall turnout for marches, rallies, vigils and other protests since Donald Trump became President at somewhere between 10 to 15 million. Never before have as many Americans protested as publicly as they are doing today.

Wither the art world in this period of protestation? Fittingly, there has also been a rash of activist-inspired exhibitions inside

US museums: from “Resistance, Protest, Resilience” at the Minnesota Institute of Art to “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85” at the Brooklyn Museum and “An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections From the Whitney’s Collection, 1940-2017” at the Whitney Museum of American Art (until 27 August).

These kinds of surveys are crucial in defining a useful lineage for protest art, which has historically fluctuated between two poles. The first is a call to action or testimony, represented by artist Robert Rauschenberg’s no-nonsense statement that “the artist’s job is to be a witness to his time in history”. At the opposite end, a leery art-for-art’s-sake belief, as voiced by *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl in 2006: “My problem with political art is not that it’s bad art necessarily, but that it is terrible politics.”

Somewhere between these two poles lies the territory upon which successive generations of Modern and contemporary American artists have staked their claim to protest. Many of their works of art comprise a powerful encyclopedia of symbols that speak truth to power; their legacy is being recognized and redefined today.

Consider this, then, a small contribution to that ongoing process: here is an incomplete history of American protest art in five essential artworks.

Walker Evans, *Bud Fields and His Family, Hale County, Alabama (1936)*



Walker Evans, *Bud Fields and His Family, Hale County, Alabama (1936)*. Digital image courtesy Getty's Open Content Program

Working with a large-format 8in x10in camera, Evans regularly captured his subjects with puritanical precision. Take this photo of the sharecropper Bud Fields and his family: three adults and three children arranged sitting or standing on two wooden chairs and a stained mattress inside a one-room wooden shack. They are all dirty and barefoot. The young boy at the center of the picture is naked from the waist down. His father, upon whose legs the boy leans, is shirtless except for a patterned kerchief. Slung over his right shoulder, the cloth is delicately placed to hide a splotch of skin cancer. Few photographs formulate the punishment that is family poverty like this image.

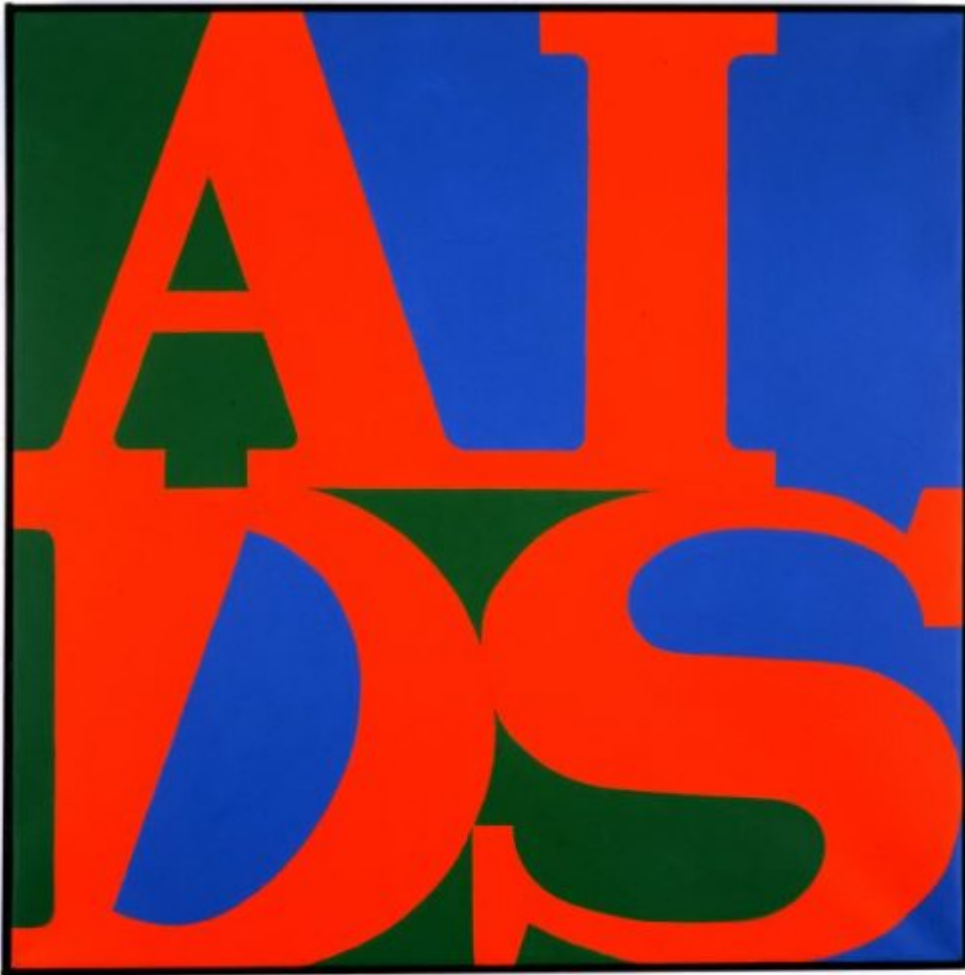
Jacob Lawrence, “The Migration Series” (1940-41)



Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration Series*, Panel no.1: During World War I there was a great migration north by southern African Americans. (1940-41) © Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

The Great Migration was, in the words of historian Henry Louis Gates Jr, “the largest movement of black bodies since slavery”. Lawrence, then an unknown 23-year-old artist, took on the subject of this industrial age exodus in 1940 using not oil but quick-drying egg tempera. His portable masterpiece compressed an entire history of African-American hardship—floods, lynchings, labor camps, race riots, mass migration and more—into a portable mural made up of 60 smallish, store-bought wooden panels. Among the artist’s greatest triumphs was achieving a demotic form that channeled the shapes and colors—as well as the triumphs and suffering—of black Americans during the mid-20th century.

General Idea, *AIDS* (1987)



General Idea, *AIDS* (1987) © The Estate of General Idea. Courtesy of the Estate of General Idea and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Finding inspiration in the darkest situations was a hallmark of the Canadian art collective General Idea. At the peak of the AIDS crisis, the group took the acronym for acquired immune deficiency syndrome and turned it into an immensely popular logo. They did so by reinterpreting another artist's work: Robert Indiana's famous 1965 logo LOVE. Their re-creation became a wearable rallying cry for millions of activists (since then it has taken on multiple forms, including wallpaper, buttons, posters, coffee mugs and postage stamps). By far their best-known work, their beloved symbol turned the scourge of AIDS into LOVE, and vice versa.

Guerrilla Girls, Do Women Have to be Naked to Get into the Met Museum? (1989)



Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into The Met. Museum?* (1989)

An anonymous collective whose members protect their identities by wearing gorilla masks, the Guerrilla Girls use “facts, humor, and outrageous visuals [to expose] sexism, racism, and corruption in politics, art, film, and pop culture”, according to their own website (www.guerrillagirls.com). This billboard poster was originally commissioned and rejected by the Public Art Fund—it was deemed too racy—so instead was first exhibited as art-vertising on the sides of New York City buses. The broadside includes both an art historical reference and cold-hard facts. Based on the painting *Odalisque With a Slave* (1839-40) by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, the work relays the following statistic: “Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.” A poster-sized version is currently on view at the Whitney Museum’s “An Incomplete History of Protest”.

Theaster Gates, *In Case of Race Riot II* (2011)



Theaster Gates, *In Case of Race Riot II* (2011), Brooklyn Museum © Theaster Gates

One of a series of works that features lengths of decommissioned fire hose, *In Case of Race Riot II* alludes to the Civil Rights

movement and, in particular, the use of high-pressure water hoses against peaceful protestors in Birmingham, Alabama, in May 1963. Hidden behind glass in a wood and metal frame, its title echoes the wording found on public alarms—"Break glass in case of fire"—to highlight the growing likelihood of racial strife in America. His work serves as warning—this is no time to be complacent, it says; injustice has returned with a vengeance, protest is in the air again.