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NEW YORK MUSEUMS SIGNAL THEIR RESISTANCE TO TRUMP

By **Andrea K. Scott** February 17, 2017



“Left Right Left Right,” by Annette Lemieux, reinstalled upside down at the Whitney in protest of the Trump Presidency.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BILL ORCUTT / WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

seven-hour reading of Langston Hughes’s poem “Let America Be America Again.” Most significant, the week after Trump signed his now unravelling travel ban, the Museum of Modern Art replaced seven works in its sacrosanct fifth-floor galleries—the domain of van Gogh, Picasso, and Pollock—with pieces by artists from three of the seven targeted Muslim-majority nations. Each is accompanied by an extended label that reads, “This work is by an artist from a nation whose citizens are being denied entry into the United States, according to a presidential executive order issued on Jan. 27, 2017. This is one of several such artworks from the Museum’s collection installed throughout the fifth-floor galleries to affirm the ideals of welcome and freedom as vital to this Museum as they are to the United States.”

The first substitute that viewers encounter at moma is a Cubist-inflected painting, from 1991, by the late Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid; its subject is an unrealized design for a health club set into a hillside overlooking Hong Kong, but its sepulchral palette of rust-brown and thundercloud-gray suggests a world on the brink of destruction. It hangs adjacent to Henri Rousseau’s crowd-pleasing canvas “The Sleeping Gypsy” (1897), an oneiric scene of a black woman traveller, safely at rest and attended by a peaceable lion. Of course, the reality for black and female bodies (not to mention brown, queer, and trans ones) is far from a dream in Trump’s America. The symbolic protest of Lemieux’s inverted signs became literal at the New Museum two days after moma’s reinstallation, when the artist A. K. Burns organized a day of information sessions on subjects ranging from civil disobedience to indigenous rights, in the museum’s theatre, with experts from the New York Civil Liberties Union, Human Rights Watch, the Center for Reproductive Rights, and other organizations. If Lemieux’s “Left Right Left Right” is a portrait of a body politic at odds with itself, Burns’s action was preparation to unite for the many marches ahead.

The day after Donald Trump was elected President, the Boston-based artist Annette Lemieux called the Whitney Museum and asked it to alter her installation “Left Right Left Right,” then on view in the show “Human Interest.” She made the piece in 1995, mounting black-and-white photographs of raised fists onto wooden handles like protest signs, and leaning them in a long row on the wall. The fists were all cropped from existing pictures, some of them famous (Martin Luther King, Jr., Richard Nixon, Jane Fonda), some not. There are thirty signs but only ten images; each repeats and some are flipped, so that the same fist points in two directions at once. The phrase “Left Right Left Right” conjures up marching feet, but also the red state/blue state divide: Lemieux conceived the piece in response to the bitterly divisive rhetoric of the Presidential race between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole. Now she wanted it to reflect something more sinister, an upended reality—so she asked the museum to turn the signs upside down. In less than a week—a nanosecond in the timeline of museum bureaucracy—the Whitney had made the change.

The Whitney may have been the first New York museum to signal its resistance to the new Administration, but waves of actions have followed. No major institution closed in response to the #J20 movement’s call for an art strike during the Inauguration, but the Whitney invited Occupy Museums to program a series of talks in its theatre, and the Brooklyn Museum hosted a