

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

An Artist Invites Visitors to Remake Historical Protest Signs

At Hunter East Harlem Gallery, Jason Lazarus demonstrates how our political needs persist over time.

Seph Rodney September 4, 2017



Installation view of Jason Lazarus: A CENTURY OF DISSENT! at the Hunter East Harlem Gallery (all photos by Benjamin Ohene-Gyeni, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Hunter East Harlem Gallery)

At heart I'm not a protestor. That sounds confessional. It's not meant to be. It's a way into me explaining my response to [Jason Lazarus's exhibition *A CENTURY OF DISSENT!*](#), currently at the Hunter East Harlem Gallery. When I wander by the gallery to see the show I run into the curator and director, Arden Sherman. I don't share this confidence with her. I don't tell her that I think that protest, like art, is idealized to have the power to effect social change, but it can't, not

by itself. I know from history that most of the time protest doesn't work, that heinous policies are still enacted, that wars are waged despite them, that the machinery of state power is rarely checked by marchers, handmade signs, and a throng of people saying one thing in unison — though it can feel intoxicating.



Outdoor sign at Hunter East Harlem Gallery
(photo by Natalie Conn)

I believe that in most, if not all protests — no matter the political affiliation or the precipitating event — the protestor is essentially saying two things: “I’m here and my feelings about this issue matter.” Too frequently, the answer to that comes back from the state: “so what?” Instead of opening with this skepticism, I ask Sherman about the arrangement of the show: under Lazarus’s direction of the summer-long public art studio, participants only remake proclamations that exist in the artist’s archive of signs used in demonstrations in Harlem over the last century. I wonder whether just having volunteers reiterate what’s been said before limits the agency of the participants. Sherman’s answer is that it’s about solidarity to political causes that persist. She thinks that one can see in these signs an historical through line of concerns about affordable housing, police brutality, access to healthcare, and economic equity.

This solidarity around socio-political circumstances comes through, as I grok the rhetorical variety of the signs. Some are declarations, like “Trump Care Makes Us Sick;” “Stop + Frisk is a Crime;” “Troubled Wisconsin Man Goes on 50 State Killing Spree” (with a photograph of [Paul Ryan](#)); “No Justice No Peace.” Some are imperatives: “We demand an End to Mass Criminalization & Incarceration of People of Color;” “Keep Quality Teachers in Harlem;” “Fight Back.” One sign contains a question that is really a pronouncement: “Black, Yellow, Red, Brown, Am I not Human?” No matter how it’s said, we are still being brutalized by the police; we are still treated by the political class as children who may be easily lied

to without concern for consequences; the needs of the working class are still subordinated to the desires of the wealthy; and we still exist in a deeply racist and misogynist culture in which despising the other is regarded as a survival technique.



Installation view of original protest signs created by gallery visitors

But, protest does two other critical things that this exhibition only implies. Firstly, it helps organizers recognize their compatriots. If you show up for a protest, or help to make signs for one, you might be persuaded to join a boycott, a letter-writing campaign, engage in direct action, and run for political office. The second function is that protest can be used as a tool of social and political justice movements. The

only such movements that have moved the ethical needle in the US have never relied solely on protest — not the labor movement, the women's rights movement, or the Civil Rights movement. They used it as one tool among others (boycotts, lawsuits, lobbying politicians) to create changes in legal frameworks, so that refusing someone housing on the basis of their ethnicity is now illegal.

This exhibition highlights fierce and passionate expression to make the point that people *do* matter. But given our successes and failures over this past century, we should realize that knowing this is really only a beginning.

Jason Lazarus: A CENTURY OF DISSENT! *continues at the Hunter East Harlem Gallery (2180 3rd Avenue at 119th Street, East Harlem, Manhattan) until September 7.*

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