ON PUBLIC USE: THE PRACTICE OF NOT AN ALTERNATIVE (In the Science Museum's *Contact Zone*)

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes an examination of the work of American art/activist collective Not an Alternative (NAA) as a third phase, or "phase change" – as defined by Brian Holmes – in relation to institutional critique in the arts. It locates their work within different theoretical approaches to socially engaged art pursuant to the domains of collaboration and participation, in relation to their artistic autonomy. The author contends that *The Natural History Museum* (TNHM), an ongoing NAA project, redefines the *modus operandi* of institutional critique through its establishment of temporary *camps* inside two major American science museums, targeting their museological *contact zone* and altering the museums' functionality. Essential to NNA's practice is their collaboration with the Native American Lummi Nation of the Pacific Northwest. The article is divided into three parts: first, theoretical contextualisation; second, past projects and relations with the Art Workers' Coalition, Hans Haacke and activist art of New York City in the 1970s and 1980s; and, lastly, their emancipation from the museological contact zone.

KEYWORDS: ART, ACTIVISM, COLLABORATION, INSTITUTIONS, PUBLIC.

RESUMO

Examina-se o trabalho do colectivo de arte e ativismo Not an Alternative (NAA), no âmbito de uma terceira fase ou *fase de mudança* da crítica de arte institucional (Brian Holmes). No contexto da arte social, expõem-se várias abordagens teóricas da arte participativa e colaborativa relativamente à autonomia artística. Argumenta-se que *The Natural History Museum* (TNHM), um projecto em curso dos NAA, redefine o *modus operandi* da crítica de arte institucional, através do estabelecimento de um *campo* temporário de trabalho no interior de duas instituições científicas Americanas de relevo, intervindo na sua *zona de contacto*, alterando, desse modo, a funcionalidade do museu. Essencial neste processo é a colaboração dos NAA com a comunidade Nativa Americana Lummi Nation do Pacífico Noroeste. Aborda-se, primeiramente, a contextualização teórica, seguida da apresentação de projetos passados, da relação com o Art Workers' Coalition, com Hans Haacke e a arte activista da cidade de Nova Iorque durante os anos sessenta/setenta, analisando, por último, a emancipação face à *zona de contacto* museológica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ARTE, ATIVISMO, COLABORAÇÃO, INSTITUIÇÕES, PÚBLICO.

Introduction

> **"The relationship between art and struggle changes according to the historical moment, the place and the issue. There is no clear model for what these artists are trying to do. What follows is the early stages of a social-change art that will be more developed even by the time this book appears. One thing is clear – that systems are changed by challenging their institutions, not by abandoning them to the opposition to do as they will. Thus, the work these artists make exists in a dialectical relationship to the work they and others make in the high art world. They are walking a tightrope between art world and real world, aesthetic and political effectiveness, trying to deal with the false conflicts on which the dominant culture bases these separations. The contradictions in which they work are part of the art they make."**
>
> Lucy Lippard (1984, *Activist Art Now, a picture essay*)

Not an Alternative (NAA) is a non-profit North American collective that combines art, activism and theory. They use a wide array of traditional artistic and non-artistic instruments, including demonstrations, talks, events, exhibitions, partnerships and collaborations with museums, and engagements with grassroots community groups, activist pressure groups and Native American communities.[1] Their founding members, Jason Jones (Creative Director) and Beka Economopoulos (Executive Director) have backgrounds in art influenced by the politically oriented art of the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program and the activism of organisations such as Greenpeace and Fission Strategy. Currently, the team's members includes representatives of Native communities and a special team to address climate issues within the Natural History Museum (TNHM) project.[2] NAA is also part of the American Alliance of Museum Directors and currently part of the activist Museum Liberation Movement/#FossilFreeCulture, a coalition pressuring cultural institutions to divest from the fossil fuel industry, which also includes US-based groups like TNHM, G.U.L.F. and Occupy Museums; the UK's Art Not Oil, BP or not BP?, Liberate Tate, Platform London, Science Unstained, Shell Out Sounds and UK Tar Sands Network; Norway's Stopp Oljesponsing av Norsk Kulturliv; and others from Brazil, Ireland, Australia and France.

The singularity and complexity of NAA's project, at the intersection of art and activism in social practice projects, lies in altering the conditions of institutional critique, the authorial means utilised by the art and their consequences for artistic autonomy. This essay focuses on their latest ongoing project – The Natural History Museum (TNHM) – and on NAA's reassessment of the functionality of natural history museums through its collaboration with the Native American Lummi Nation of the Pacific Northwest and the partnerships established with the Carnegie Natural History Museum of Pittsburgh (CNHM) and the Florida Natural History Museum (FNHM).

I argue that their desire to work with and for the people translates into transforming the conditions of a museological *contact zone* by addressing the current environmental crisis in terms of social, economic, cultural and political justice.[3] In the TNHM project, we might identify a degree of *entryism*, in the Trotskyist sense of the word, as it occupies a host museum in order to identify and stimulate support for its own cause, exerting influence on the nature and direction of policy within the host institution (Webber 1981, 34). To establish a "camp" in these museums involves a collective commitment to a relationship of long-term communication with one of many Native American communities disempowered throughout their history, most recently by neoliberal environmental politics. Thus, the project combines arts expertise in the domain of object making, architecture, media installation and the use of a prominent

[1] Not an Alternative website: http://notanalternative.org/about-us/

[2] Also part of the NAA team are Judith Leblanc, Director of the Native Organisers' Alliance, Cassandra Begay (Diné), Director of Community Engagement with TNHM, Julian Brave Noisecat (Secwepemc/St'at'imc), Narrative Change Director with THNM, Ruth Miller (Dena'ina Athabaskan), Storytelling Organiser with (TNHM), Kay Bosworth, a PhD student in the department of Geography, Society and Environment at the University of Minnesota, Karina Yager (Quechua), Director of Education with TNHM, Steve Lyons, Director of Research with TNHM, and Mark Auslander, Director of Special Projects with TNHM. TNHM currently has a team of 16 advisors from various fields related to the environment.

[3] Drawing from James Clifford' via Marie Louise Pratt's definition of contact zones, a "term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt *apud* Boast 1991, 34). Robin Boast, 2011, *Neo-colonial Collaboration: Museum as Contact Zone Revisited*, 2 and also in Museum Anthropology, 34, n1, 56-70.

symbolic language with porous community relations toward a political assemblage of events and exhibitions within these "occupied" science museums. An unusual symbiosis, where the collective actions and outcomes are ultimately defined by activist planning and organisation – a social aesthetic experience of multiple forms of public political engagement.[4] Their overall project challenges the arts' authorial conditions through *extradisciplinary* investigation – a concept involving a new tropism and reflexivity, bringing artists, theorists and activists together to engage with situations beyond the traditional limits of their practice (Holmes 2007, no pagination). I will trace back NAA's roots to the art-, activism- and community-based organisation of New York in the 1970s and 80s, the institutional critique of the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC) and the work of the artist Hans Haacke during that same period.

I. Theoretical contextualisation

According to the historian Miwon Kwon, North America witnessed a fundamental transformation in public artistic practice from a physical to a social specificity, as the search for a relation between art, life and community implied a different artistic autonomy.

Her analysis reveals how collective projects can differently interrogate the socio-political conditions, because the public(s) become an authorised element within the production of the work as opposed to the ones individually done (Kwon 2002, 72–85). In this sense, social and political repercussions follow from the artist's commitment to non-artistic groups. In her analysis of John Ahearn's casts of Bronx's residents installed on the facade of Bronx buildings in 1985, Kwon's affirms that instead of supporting the ideologies of dominant social groups, Ahearn empowered those marginalised by such ideologies (Kwon 2002, 88).

Pablo Helguera reflects on the intersection of different fields of expertise in the conditions of implementing collaborative acts and sees this as crucial for developing long-term relationships with partners outside the artistic community (Helguera 2011, 28). Hal Foster's critique of the artist as a quasi-anthropologist is that such a role might abstract the culture of study and confirm the artist's authority, reducing exchange to a neo-colonial mode of artistic expression (Foster, 1996, 190). For Grant Kester, the interchangeability of the relationship between artist and community is the condition for a political formation in process, where not only does the artist derive his/her identity and legitimacy from the community, but the latter is also empowered through symbolic artistic mediation. Claire Bishop, on the other hand, considers that the contradictions of the social and the political can be articulated in certain collaborative disruptive practices of confrontation. Art's autonomy would then be exclusively related to the domain of *aisthesis*, applied as an ameliorative promise of change, and on the opposite spectrum to social intervention.[5] Bishop argues that community projects put art in danger of becoming equivalent to and mixed in with governmental tactical practices for social inclusion that leave structural inequalities uninterrogated, an *ethical turn* whereby ethical criteria replace aesthetic criteria, and an artist's self-sacrificial duty is to connect art to the real world, where "artistic strategies of disruption, intervention or over-identification are denigrated as 'unethical'" (Bishop 2006, 8). Sven Lütticken's aesthetic rearticulation of artistic autonomy portrays a porous relationship between autonomy and heteronomy in aesthetics, which in some cases stages a passage from the artistic to the political. This happened in Andrea Fraser's institutional critique of the 1990s, where the practitioner became the battlefield upon which artistic autonomy was re-evaluated (Lutticken 2012, 90,104).[6] Such a critique of the societal function of artwork and of labour is enacted from within, not from an external position.

However, we may ask how distant from the real world of labour and mass culture is Fraser's performatic practice? On which terms can artistic autonomy be problematised in an

[4] In Kester's interpretation of Roland Barthes's *The Death of the Author*, he reflects on a dissociation of the artwork from a possible function in society: "Barthes will call for forms of writing that refuse the utilitarian demands of conventional signification" (Kester 2011, 46-47).
Reflecting on Tania Bruguera's concept of *Arte Útil*, its complexity and application through Bruguera's and other artists' projects, John Byrne writes: " projects such as *Arte Útil*, and the whole notion of 'useful art', carry with them the means and the necessity to rethink and repurpose the term 'autonomy' in order to reactivate the very possibility of a radical alternative (Byrne 2017, 61-69).

[5] In Bishop's reflection what is implied is a separation between art's autonomy and social and political change. For Bishop, in artistic practice, social intervention is on the opposite spectrum to autonomy, understandable in controversial confrontational practices (Bishop 2006, n.p.).

[6] Through a reflection on Andrea Fraser's authorial modes of interacting in the art institutional world, Lutticken exposes the artist's questioning of artistic authorship and autonomy, which is related to the Rancieran *aesthetic regime*, in the passage from the artistic to the political (Lutticken 2012, 90-92).

environment of public collaboration, outside the limits of the museum?

For Grant Kester, either the political works subject to the aesthetic, as in Modernism, where the separation between aesthetic autonomy and the social and the political was clear, or this autonomy must be recalibrated in response to the historical moment and as a challenge to the legitimacy of the aesthetic (Kester 2011, 38).[7] Confronting two different modes of collaborating, he distinguishes practices where the "experience of collaborative labour is seen as generative, not simply symbolic, improvisationally responsive rather than scripted, and in which the distribution of agency is more reciprocal", therefore embedded in a collective experience of creative autonomy, and individual practices that miss the complexities of the collective forms of negotiation, possessing an impoverished praxis of textual social discourse (Kester 2011, 76).[8]

John Byrne articulates a historical trajectory of artistic autonomy with his analysis of Tania Bruguera's Association de Arte Útil (AAU) and Museum of Arte Útil, at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2013). AAU is an ongoing project to produce international online and offline resources, or a toolkit, that brings together and propagates forms of art practice that seek to have direct and lasting social, political and economic impact (Byrne 2017, 71). Bruguera's project allows for a re-articulation between autonomy, heteronomy and use value that is able to surpass an irreconcilable art/life dichotomy: "From a use of art that symbolically imagines alternative possible futures within an existing frame-work of production and consumption to a use of art that enables diverse constituencies to reimagine what the work, or labour, of art could be today" (Byrne 2017, 69).[9]

For Brian Holmes, there is an *effectiveness* that comes from "a perceptual, analytic and expressive collaboration, which lends an affective charge to the interpretation of a real-world situation" (Holmes 2012, 78). An exchange between the artist/instigator and the citizen/collaborator happening outside art's white cube dreamland, within a collaborative act of people resisting together. For Holmes, rearticulating autonomy is adapting it to artistic practice in connection with collaboration, stating that our existence as ourselves only lives through the *other*, and that giving yourself your own law is a collective adventure (Holmes 2004, 548).

Kate Crehan (2011) traces 40 years of the art English collective Free Form (1970s). Her anthropological investigation reveals how a collaborative art practice of shared authorial means enacts the possibilities of a porous communication, of interchangeability between the artist and the community where he/she includes herself, and how artistic authorship is being constantly re-evaluated throughout such practice.[10] Away from the established gallery circuit, these artists did not dispense with the most fundamental principle in art making, to question its authorial purpose.[11]

II Past projects and other critical histories

NAA's name (Not an Alternative) sets out the goals of the group at the very outset – not to separate themselves from the arena of power as an alternative to a prevailing logic, but rather to resist that framework, the tendency to frame dissent in the guise of an alternative status, the pure or utopian possibility that remains on the margin by definition of its status as an alternative, the non-empowered.[12] On the one hand, NAA's name confronts the position taken by groups engaged in art and social discourse, and which are marginalised for appearing to substitute artist-generated services that are reforming, rather than transforming, neoliberal, politically-generated inequalities (Sholette 2015, 105). On the other hand, their practice validates social relationships

[7] For Kester, the tension between the site of the political and the site of the aesthetic enables "progress" translated into an ongoing movement – the content of the art is to reflect on its own enabling conditions. For this author, in order to avoid reproducing the dominant power structure by concretely challenging it through action, art still found a tactical withdrawal into the artwork, continuing the process of isolation of the discourse of aesthetic autonomy (Kester 2011, 35-37, 45-46).

[8] Kester's writings emphasise the benefits of collaboration, long duration and the necessity of abolishing the segregation involved in the historically created distance between art and social life through Modernism. However, critical of contemporary text-based practices detached from political engagement and compromise, which in his opinion are victims of key characteristics of post-structuralist thought, he measures the benefits and counterproductive aspects of this distant and custodial relationship to the viewer (Kester 2011, 54).

[9] This author argues that the perspective that sees art as the physical embodiment of non-alienated labour and uses craft as the work's ethical shield against mass production instrumentalisation "also provides the conceptual framework within which the two seemingly irreconcilable positions of autonomy and heteronomy have traditionally met: the qualitative and ethical bodily function of the work or labour of art that, in turn, underpins the valorisation of authentic labour in art" (Byrne 2017, 65-66).

[10] Crehan's analysis also reveals how these community artists were marginalised through public institutions armoured with set principles and rules concerning what art is about. Her work shows how Free Form, though removed from the gallery world, were not removed from art, as they were constantly challenging its authorial constitution by further interweaving aesthetics and politics in long processes of field interaction (Crehan 2011, 79-80).

[11] Crehan's analysis shows that by working in collaboration with citizens of a community at risk, Free Form was subject to marginalisation by their art peers, as in New York, art criticism was, during this period, oblivious to the value of community arts for the authorial re-evaluation of art itself.

However, in both cases – Free Form and New York activist artists – as Lucy Lippard writes, the artists were not excluding themselves from art but rather from the elitist art establishment, similarly to Crehan's observations (See also Lippard 1984, 10-19, 44-49, 193-228, 299-323, 324-331).

[12] Alexandra do Carmo, interview wit NAA and John Hawke, Washington DC, August 2018.

of collaborative shared authorship. NAA continues a lineage of art and activist projects critical of the neoliberal practices and consumer-driven expectations of Western societies. It pursues a practice of investigating the public's expectations regarding accommodated institutionalised power, expanding intervention through art.

NAA started their activity out of a space in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, in the mid-2000s: researching, experimenting and building alliances with other artists, activists and community groups, engaging in struggles concerning land use, housing gentrification and displacement.[13] Lectures and discussions fed the plans for interventionist work, connecting politicised campaigns with artistic tools, in a permanent laboratory scenario. Assuming a political dimension (Lyons and Economopoulos 2015, n.p.), NAA claims propaganda as an open-source visual language, challenging what artist Jonas Stall called a masterful ideological removal operation of propaganda from art in Western capitalist democracies (Stall 2014, n.p.).

In 2009, NAA collaborated with the grassroots organisation for social justice *Picture the Homeless* (PTH) in a project to highlight the Harlem neighbourhood potential use of a vacant lot owned by JPMorgan Chase, the world's ninth-largest banking and investment firm. NAA's theatrical appropriation involved entering a locked vacant lot through a fence and hosting a potluck, music video shoot, dance party and eventually a speak-out by community members.[14] Invited to enjoy the space, people talked about housing, gentrification and the communal potential of privately owned spaces (McKee 2016, 128).

In the project *Building Occupation*, the contradictions and failures of then-New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's five-year plan to end homelessness were emphasised by making visible the thousands of city- and bank-owned properties sitting vacant. Members of PTH occupied the inside of a boarded-up, vacant bank-owned building, while NAA made their message visible to supporters and members of the media on the outside.[15] These actions contributed to the effectiveness of their work during Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and post-Occupy, when developing actions during Hurricane Sandy in New York in 2012 in a collaboration with Occupy Sandy (McKee 2016, 127-134, 200-215).

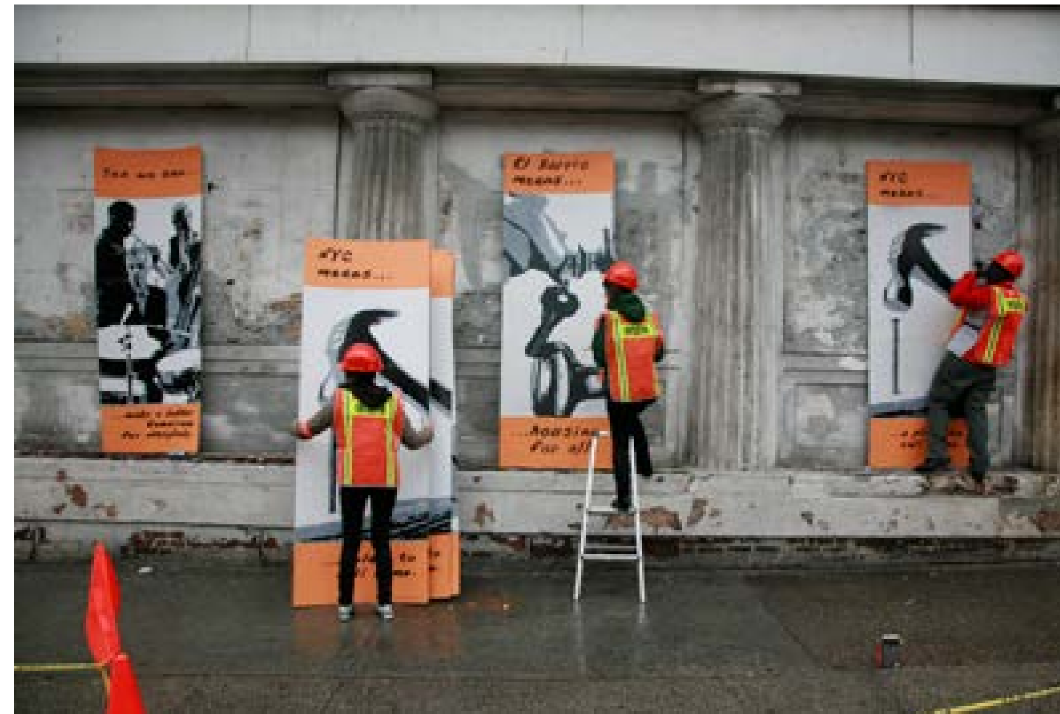


FIG. 1: *Building Occupation*, 2008-2011. Not An Alternative and allies working in collaboration with Picture The Homeless on a building occupation in East Harlem, El Barrio. Part of a campaign to bring attention to the contradiction and failure in Mayor Bloomberg's five-year plan to end homelessness by making visible the thousands of city and bank owned properties sitting vacant in New City. March 19th 2009. Photo credit—Andrew Stern

Noting the vulnerability of the symbolic dimension of spatial architecture in capitalist democracies, NAA is profoundly interested in redeploying the language already in place, reorienting its meaning as a visual manifestation of counter-power

During Occupy Wall Street (2011), NAA participated in the construction of a symbolic arena of commonality, frequently using the symbolic tools of forensics and the orange visual language of construction work. This set up a vocabulary of solidarity with activist movements in other places, including Spain's *In Medium* and the *Indignados*, who were themselves dealing with gentrification and displacement, and used yellow and black adhesive tape).[16] NAA also worked in collaboration with the artist John Hawke[17], whose *Orange Work* laid the groundwork and explored the possibilities for agency in the use of the visual language of construction work.[18]

[13] Real estate speculation and privatisation has had a significant impact in unprivileged New York neighbourhoods, where the housing crisis has also been aggravated due to a ferocious bank foreclosure process. Through symbolic markers, NAA found non-governmental communication outlets and explored media interfaces with propaganda to develop a language of their own (McKee 2016, 127-135)

[14] A potluck is a communal dinner for unexpected guests, from the North American indigenous communal meal *potlatch*.

[15] Appropriating an ad campaign sponsored by the local Business Improvement District (BID) which encouraged investment in the community, postering slogans on the plywood blanks of construction sites, such as "*El Barrio means history*" or "*El Barrio means home,*" or "*El Barrio means new opportunities*", accompanied with photos of public figures such as Barack Obama. Using undercover construction worker clothes and working tools, NAA's crew installed painted signs that looked very similar to the official street signage found on lampposts throughout the neighbourhood, but with rather different messages— by recontextualising the slogans, it attributed them a new meaning by exposing the fundamental racial inequality of the neighbourhood (*El Barrio Means housing for all*, or *El Barrio means a place to call home*, *El Barrio means a better tomorrow for everybody*), and instead of public figures, it showed pictures of working tools, such as a hammer, or trivial gestures, such the opening of a door, or scenes of a mother and son baking.

FIG. 2: *Mili-tents*, 2008-on. A symbol of Occupy Wall Street, later used in other contexts such as the People´s Climate March. Photo credit—Andrew Stern

Occupy Tape was the name of NAA's high-visibility caution tape, imprinted with "Occupy". It was used for delimiting spaces at ATMs, banks, foreclosed homes and at Occupy actions in NYC and around the country, highlighting locations as though they were crime scenes. The "Mili-Tents" were real tents repurposed as symbols carried aloft on marches, mounted on poles, emblazoned with messages and with lanterns inside. *Occupy Police Blocks* repurposed the NYPD's giant concrete spatial demarcation blocks to reorient their meaning towards the OWS anniversary. They were installed in the form of carved foam and painted with the same colours

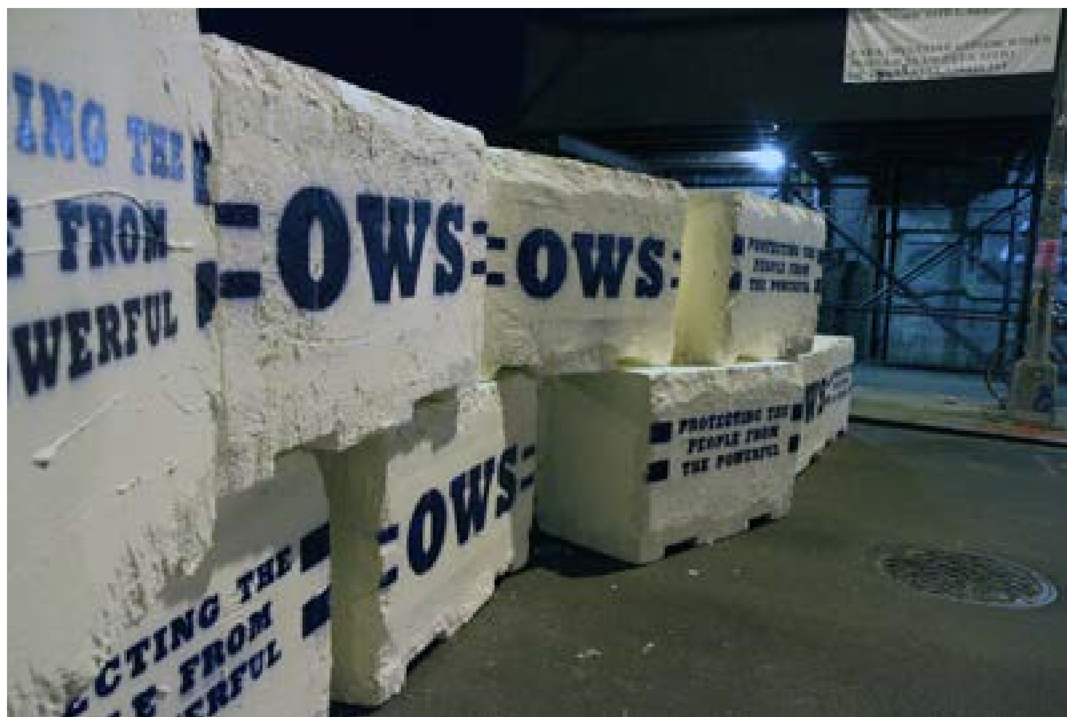


FIG. 3: *Protecting the People from the Powerful*, 2011 At Occupy Wall Street (OWS), a project for the first anniversary of OWS New York, in collaboration with the artist John Hawke. Photo credit—Not An Alternative

and fonts used by the NYPD, but printed with the slogan "defending the PEOPLE from the powerful".[19]

Jodi Dean (a member of NAA) makes reference to Slavoj Zizek's decline of symbolic efficiency in affirming that our present communicative instruments prevent us from creating shared public meanings. For Dean, the strange merging of democracy and capitalism is captured by the concept of communicative capitalism, which allows us to understand the way networked communications bring the two together (Dean 2009, 19-48, 63-67).[20] NAA imagines situations that are built on this awareness, and the symbolic dimension to their work is intended to affect the meaning of collectiveness (a name in common), the understanding of how commonality can be exercised in the public domain (Holmes 2012, 74-75).

The Art Workers' Coalition and Hans Haacke: New York City activist art of the late 1960s/70s

When viewed within its historical context, NAA can be seen to have its roots in the approach taken by art towards institutional critique in the 1960s and 70s, and to Hans Haacke, a founding member of the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC). Haacke deeply and effectively questioned the interstices of the culture industry, asserting that the identity of an artwork was inseparable from the conditions of its existence.[21] In *The Museum Divide; Beyond Institutional Critique*, a panel organised by NAA, Haacke reflected on the search conducted by artists for ways to interact with the institution, exploring the split within the contradictory nature of museological practice. The AWC was founded in January 1969 in New York as an association of artists, writers and cultural workers who shared a commitment to

[16] "The tape visually conjugated the figure of the crime scene-a place of forensic investigation of violence—with that of the construction zone, an area of unfinished collective work and potentiality" (McKee 2016, 129,131).

[17] Hawke, unpublished artist notebooks, consulted in 2014 and 2015.

[18] Hawke proposes an artistic action that aims to create rupture in the urban landscape. He talks about an extra-legal mode of operating in the public sphere. The concept of extra legality works in opposition to illegality: under a self-authorized created "law," or "regulation" the artist is able to perform his/her activity under the banner of something indeterminate (as seen in Hawke's artist notebooks).

[19] This sentence comes from an earlier project by Hawke ("Impala", 2011) in which the sentence was attached as a decal on NYPD patrol cars (as seen in Hawke's artist notebooks and http://notanalternative.org/projects/).

[20] See also Dean (2012, 122-123) and Fisher (2009, 58-65).

[21] Haacke's own work has the capacity to challenge the neutrality of the institution, as Rosalyn Deutsche mentioned in 1971 (Deutsche 1996). In 1971, Haacke's show at the Guggenheim was cancelled. The artist used the media to expose the work and the conditions involved in its cancellation. Deutsche mentions that by cancelling Haacke' exhibition, the museum director was excluding from the museum conflicts that are inherent to the aesthetic domain. As such, the museum was declaring the existence of a universal aesthetic devoid of social and political conflict. See specifically Deutsche, 1996, xviii. The episode was and remains significant to all contemporary artists engaged in dismantling the institutional mechanisms of power that insist on maintaining the delirious idea of a political neutral institutional domain, in art and all other institutions. Rosalyn Deutsche, 1996, *Evictions, Art and Spatial Politics*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England.

social action and the reform and re-evaluation of art institutions. By putting the functions of art institutions on trial, they sought not to eliminate but rather to transform them (Brian-Wilson 2009, 4, 9).[22]

During the era of the Vietnam War, US artists discussed how to organise themselves collectively, the social meaning of artistic labour and how art and politics interact.[23] They attempted to conjugate art with activism, redefining the artist as *art worker*. This legacy is significant to contemporary artists eager to reassess artistic function in the institutional context. NAA inherited parts of the conceptual framework of the institutional critique from that period in the sense that they address the context of the museum, "a frame that overdetermines what encompasses, a frame that is inherently ideological and made of a myriad of cultural, social and political elements" (Alberro 2009, 5). However, their overall mechanisms for exposing the institution are different. Whereas Haacke, in *Recording of Climate in Art Exhibition* (1970), revealed the formal conditions of the museum climate, thus making visible the way in which the institutional environment impacts the artworks (Skrebowski 2013, 120,121), NAA operates in collaboration with non-artistic communities, using institutional art critique tools to expose how the institution impacts the communities with which they interact, and their global impact.

Another difference in relation to the 1980/90s period is evidenced by NAA's 2006 project *Mining the Houston Museum of Natural History* (HMNH), hosted by Row Houses, an artistic residence, in partnership with TEJAS (Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services), a local activist environmental group. It echoed Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992), conceived for the Maryland Historical Society, in which Wilson reinstalled the collection of the museum to expose the institution's responsibility for their whitewashed representation of slavery. In the same way, NAA exposed the fundamental politically constructed biases of the HMNH by building a counter-exhibition to HMNH's Exxon Mobil sponsorship. However, the collaboration with Row Houses and TEJAS includes the communities affected by the environmental policies this museum supports.

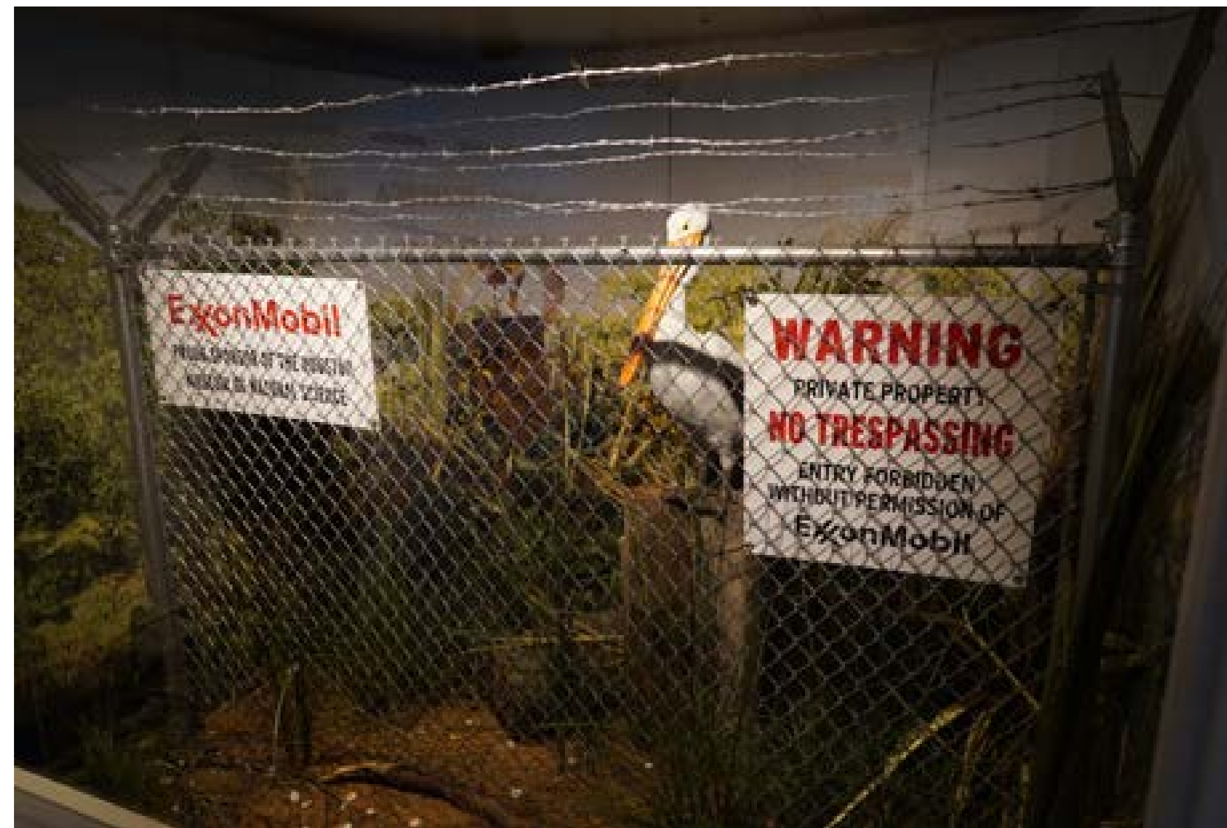


FIG. 4: *Mili-tents*, 2008-on. A symbol of Occupy Wall Street, later used in other contexts such as the People´s Climate March. Photo credit — Andrew Stern

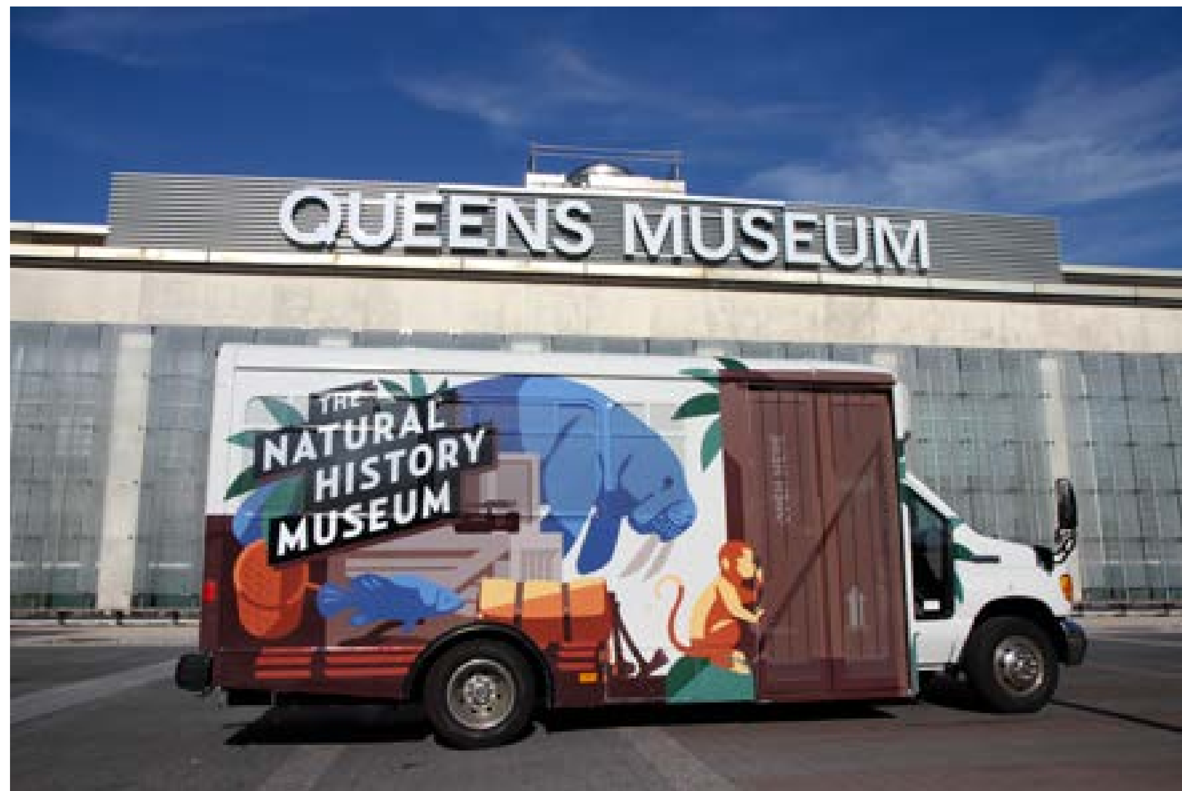
NAA also bears some relation to the protest art, community activism and urban architecture of 1970s NYC, a time during which collaboration between minority groups and artists built up a social and political body of resistance aimed at improving local living conditions and cultural equity, as exemplified by the Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG), Cityarts Workshop, City Walls and Smokehouse. These were art forms involving the public(s) and/or their locales, reinforcing participation in low-income neighborhoods (Hannan, 2013, cccii, ccciv, cccv, cdxi).

III. The Natural History Museum

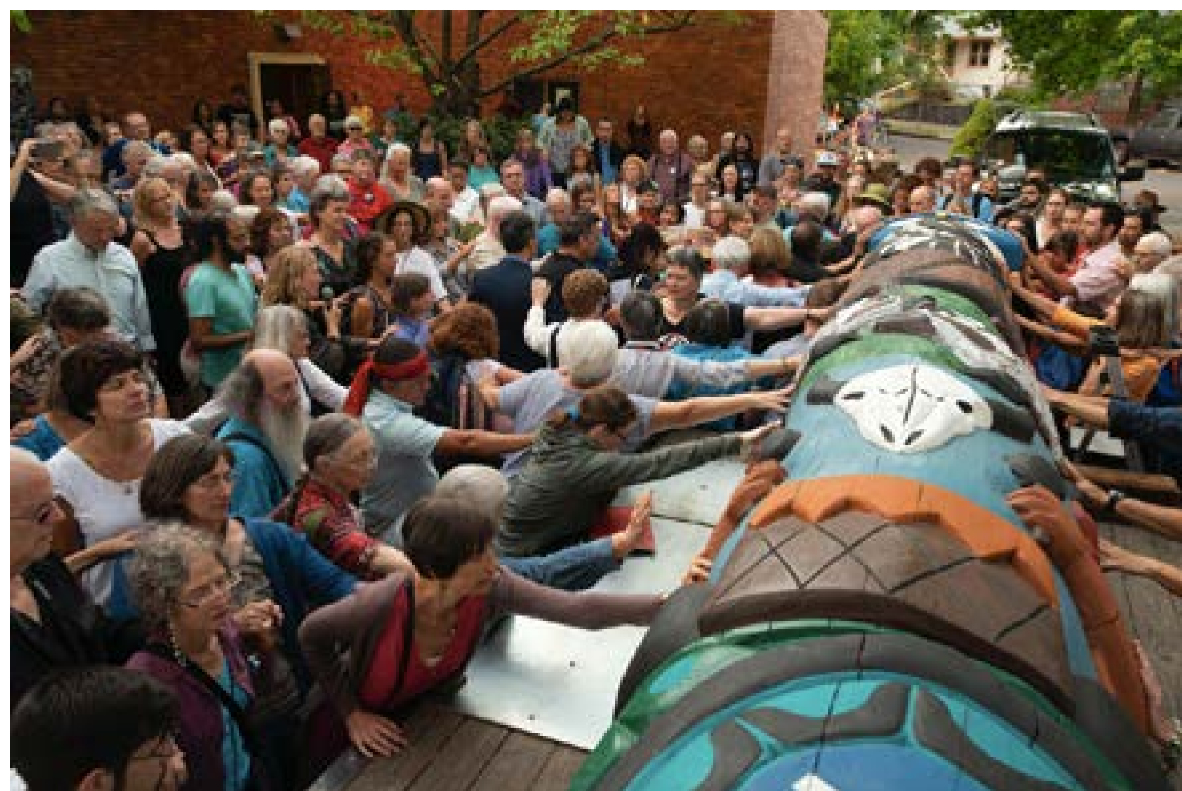
In 2014, NAA invented a new institution, the Natural History Museum (TNHM), which has been ongoing since then. It is mobile and virtual, and fundamentally critical of the history and ideology of natural history museums. The TNHM temporarily partnered with established science

[22] During the 1960s and 70s, the function of the art institution was being questioned and tested—not in order to abolish it but rather to transform it, asserting its societal value, was the function of the artist once again. Just like the artists of this period, NAA presently recognises the value of institutions, and the necessity of their transformation, however different the means used. Brian-Wilson discusses the redefinition of art in this period and the critique of minimalism—arguing that the emergence of the *art worker* in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States was catalysed by the AWC and the Art Strike, but was also dialectically forged in relation to these artists' own changing artistic and critical methods—having roots in the redefinition of art as labour in the minimalist art that preceded and informed the AWC (Brian-Wilson 2009, 4, 9, 142).
See also Skrebowski (2013).

[23] In addressing failure and conflict in the AWC's attempts to reconfigure the role of viewers, market values, commodity-objects, art institutions, and coalitional politics. "an artistic collective identity was emerging, along with protest art, and the participation of artists in various social movements, such as Black Power, Chicano rights, Women's Liberation, and Gay Rights" (Brian-Wilson 2009, 4).



institutions, working through exhibitions, panel discussions and events in collaboration with the Native American Lummi Nation of the Pacific Northwest. It addresses the relationship between the environment, natural sciences and impacts on Native communities.



Realising that the name of "The Natural History Museum" had not been claimed, NAA established themselves centrally in the discursive sphere of science museums by becoming *the* Ur-level institution of its kind. They were able to join professional organisations of science museum directors merely through the act of paying annual membership. In so doing, they (TNHM) – a shell institution – were able to interact with real bricks-and-mortar institutions and, in some circumstances, on equal terms, as in professional roundtable discussions.[24] At present, it is a complex organisation that explores storytelling, education and Native narratives.

The TNHM was created as a collaborative enterprise, engaging in temporary partnerships with the Carnegie Natural History Museum (CMNH) of Pittsburgh and Florida Natural History Museum (FNHM). The exhibitions, panel discussions and events they helped organise address the economically implicated relationship of science museums to anti-environmental corporate interests. In doing so, they critically reassembled the communicative tools operated by normative natural history museums. Initially, the critique was directed at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York, specifically the museum's ties with fossil fuel exploitation. David Koch, a board member of the AMNH, had extensive ties to American coal production.[25] NAA took notice of the disapproval of museum visitors and workers, who felt this confluence of a natural science museum with a climate change denier associated with the fossil fuel industry to be deeply contentious. In 2016, the TNHM initiated and led a campaign that emerged from the natural sciences community but was aimed at engaging the general public. It took the form of a petition signed by dozens of preeminent scientists and over 200,000 citizens, questioning the integrity of scientific institutions compromised by their association with interests that undermine climate-related environmental regulations and clean energy legislation, and disputing their

FIG. 5: The Natural History Museum´s Van.

FIG. 6: Lummi Totem Pole Journey 2016, Portland, Oregon. Tribal leaders and members of the public touch a totem pole carved by Jewell James and the House of Tears Carvers during a Totem Pole Blessing Ceremony organized by the Lummi Nation in Portland, Oregon on August 24, 2016. Dedicated to the sacred obligation to draw the line against fossil fuel developments that threaten our collective future, the pole travels to sites of environmental struggle across the country to build solidarity between communities. Photo credit —Paul Anderson / Courtesy of the Lummi Nation.

[24] NAA explains some strategies and states that when looking for allies in the museum sector, the collaboration would bolster their own legitimacy as a science institution and simultaneously amplify the struggles of Indigenous communities (Economopoulos, 2018).

[25] "We would be interested in taking David Koch out of the Board but we believe that in order to do it we can't protest the Museum. We need to appeal to the positive aspirations to the people on the inside to see if we can activate them, like a union organising campaign, we organize the workers inside the factory or the desires of the museum visitors who take their kids there because they love the museum and they would hate an activist who would walk themselves to the front of the doors – we should think about them as the movement, so we will become a museum" (Economopoulos, 2018, 8).

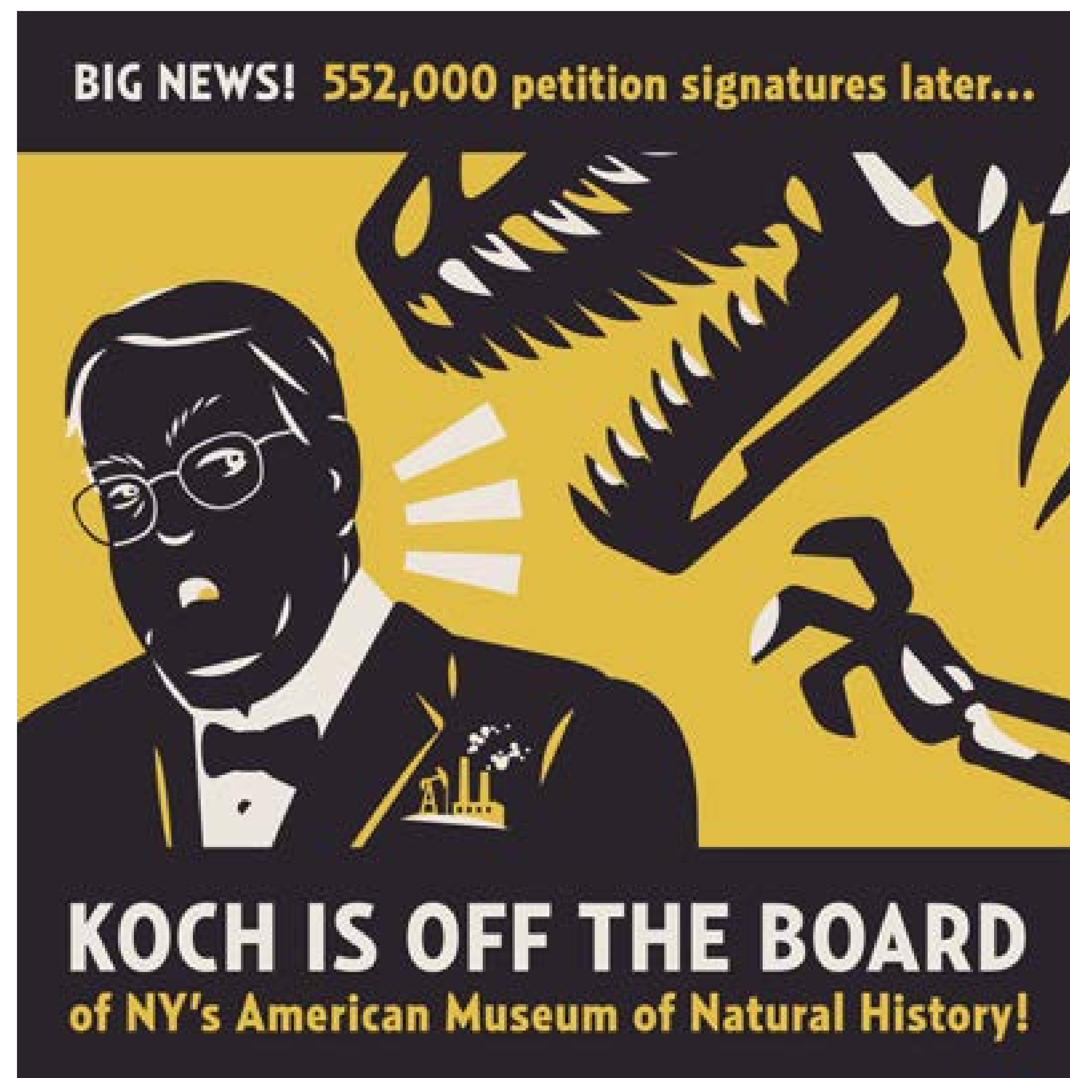


FIG. 7: The Natural History Museum, 2016, *Koch is off the board! of the AMNH.*

ability to transmit scientific knowledge and maintain public confidence. In particular, it targeted AMNH museum trustees such as Rebekah Mercer, a Trump supporter, and Koch, a fossil fuel tycoon and influential donor to conservative causes.

The AMNH denied that Mr. Koch's subsequent resignation was connected to the pressure campaign, but its effectiveness was later publicly acknowledged.[26]

In 2016 TNHM joined the Standing Rock movement against the proposed Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), which, despite tribal opposition, was set to cut through Sioux territory and across the Missouri River, a move that could risk the primary water source for the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation and 17 million people downstream. TNHM initiated a joint protest by issuing an open letter signed by 1,281 museum directors, archaeologists, anthropologists and historians, denouncing the company behind DAPL for desecrating ancient burial sites, places of prayer and other significant cultural artifacts that were sacred to the Lakota and Dakota people. However, the protests were not sufficient to permanently stop the construction. In 2017 the Trump administration reversed President Obama's suspension of the project and the pipeline was built.[27]

After 2017, the TNHM established long term partnerships with the CMNH of Pittsburgh and the FNHM. In a text released in July 2018, "The Right Side of History: How can museums support Native-led climate justice initiatives?", Beka Economopoulos, Director of the TNHM, describes the intentions of the museum, releasing a set of suggestions for how to proceed in order to align museum practices with the global climate and environmental justice movement. The TNHM would serve as an independent research lab, propelling other museums into new forms of collaboration and public engagement programming. At the 2018 Conference of the International Council of Museums Committee for Museums and Collections of Natural History (ICOM NATHIST) on the Anthropocene era, held at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History (CMNH), NAA's work interrogated museum levels of support for Native-led climate justice initiatives through panels, roundtables and luncheons with a delegation of tribal leaders from across North America. They launched *Kwel' Hoy: We Draw the Line*, a three-year travelling exhibition and event series co-created with leaders from the Lummi Nation, including totem pole carving and blessing ceremonies.[28] The Lummi produced a totem pole especially for the 2017 Carnegie journey event, led by Jewell James and the House of Tears Carvers. The pole continued its journey to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where it was exhibited along with the artefacts in the CMNH, and stayed there for six months.[29]

[26] And the pressure was felt in other institutions: "At least six museums have responded by either divesting from fossil fuels, dropping fossil fuel sponsors, or implementing gift policies that preclude them from taking fossil fuel industry funding: California Academy of Sciences (divest + gift policy), Australian Academy of Sciences (divest), London Science Museum (end of Shell Oil sponsorship deal), Field Museum in Chicago (divest), Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Garden in Pittsburgh (divest + gift policy)". See also all the media coverage of a rally organised by The Natural History Museum and ClimateTruth.org, where more than 500 climate scientists took to the streets alongside Indigenous leaders and frontline community groups. See http://thenaturalhistorymuseum.org/hundreds-of-scientists-take-to-the-streets/ and http://thenaturalhistorymuseum.org/koch-is-off-the-board/

[27] See Demos (2017).

[28] "Kwel' Hoy" is as much a content-driven exhibition as it is a model for replication. We want to shine a spotlight on the many ways museums can participate in the climate and environmental justice movement, not only as advocates but also as supporters of communities that are leading the charge. Of course, every museum has its own specific mission, expertise and operational limitations, but even the smallest institutions in the most conservative states can take real steps" (Economopoulos 2018, 35).

[29] The Lummi Nation were invested in ceremonies that included hand-carved totem poles as a social and political activity before NAA approached them, but NAA catapulted this community into a multi-layered media dimension (Economopoulos 2018, 33).

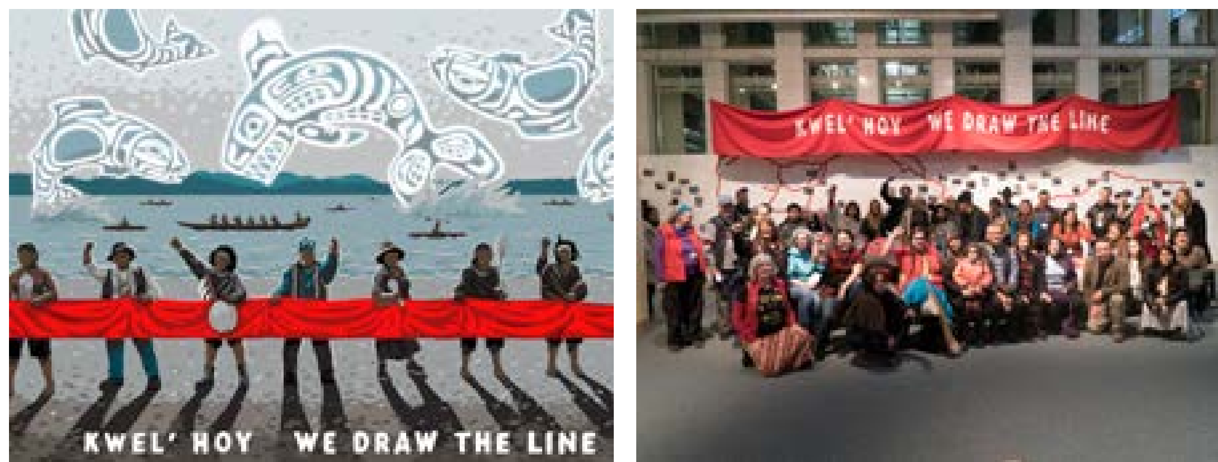


FIG. 8 and 9: *Kwel Hoy We Draw the Line*, October 2017 to March 2018, The House of Tears Carvers of the Lummi Nation and *The Natural History Museum*, at the Carnegie Natural History Museum, Pittsburgh. Photo credit—Not An Alternative

Members of more than a dozen native nations helped develop the exhibition. The pole's journey meant to serve as a catalyst: it was intended to be touched by travellers, in contravention of the standard museological practice of treating objects purely for aesthetic reflection. Instead, the members of the Lummi Nation wanted to emphasise the travel and not the object, so it was displayed horizontally, demystifying the monumentality associated with public art statuary.[30]

A long red cloth held by participants was used as a symbolic stop sign, symbolising a barrier against the exploration of fossil fuels. Besides its effective physical presence in ceremonies, protests and other events, this red line was present in almost all the objects, drawings and other visuals produced. At the Watershed Center, a science education and advocacy centre outside Princeton, New Jersey, the pole was erected on the perimeter in a public event where members of the Lummi Nation, the local Ramapough Lenape Nation and the director of the Watershed Institute

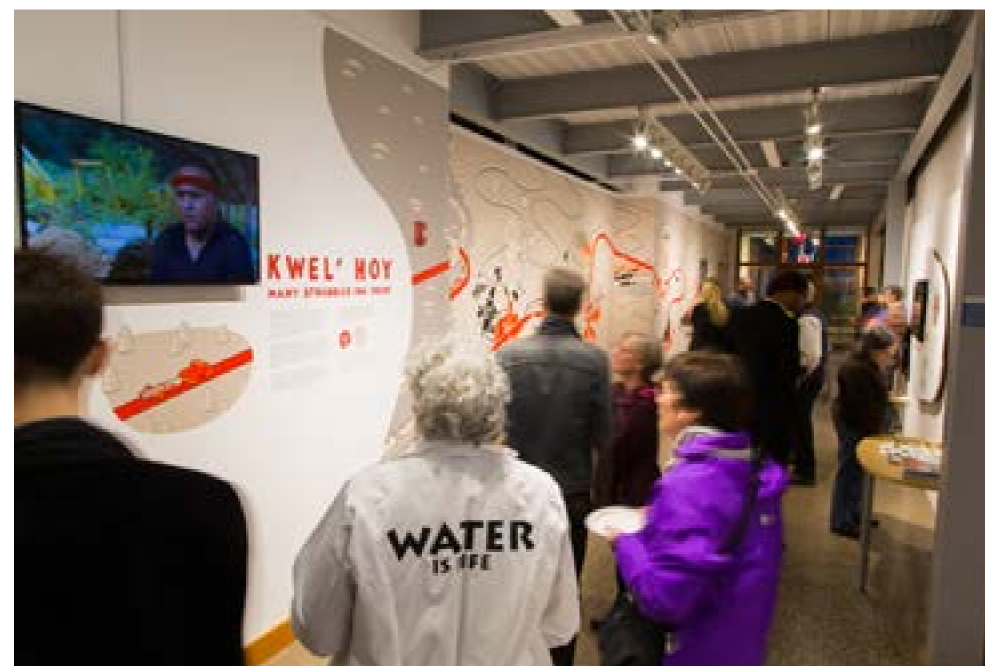


FIG. 11: *Kwel Hoy : Many Struggles One Front*, 2018, The Natural History Museum with the House of Tears Carvers of the Lummi Nation, Ramapough Lenape Nation, Watershed Institute, Princeton Environmental Institute and Center for the Humanities at CUNY Graduate Center. Co-sponsored by the Princeton Art Museum as part of "Migrations". Panorama views of museum installation. Photo credit—Not An Alternative

came together. It was also a moment where the institution recognised the transformative power of these actions[31].

At the FMNH (2018), the pole's journey also served as a way of connecting with people. *Whale People: Protectors of the Sea* provoked a reflection on the current environmental crisis, raising awareness about the threatening living conditions of the killer whale or orca. It connected exploitative policies, such as drilling for oil, with the lives of animals whose presence ripples through the

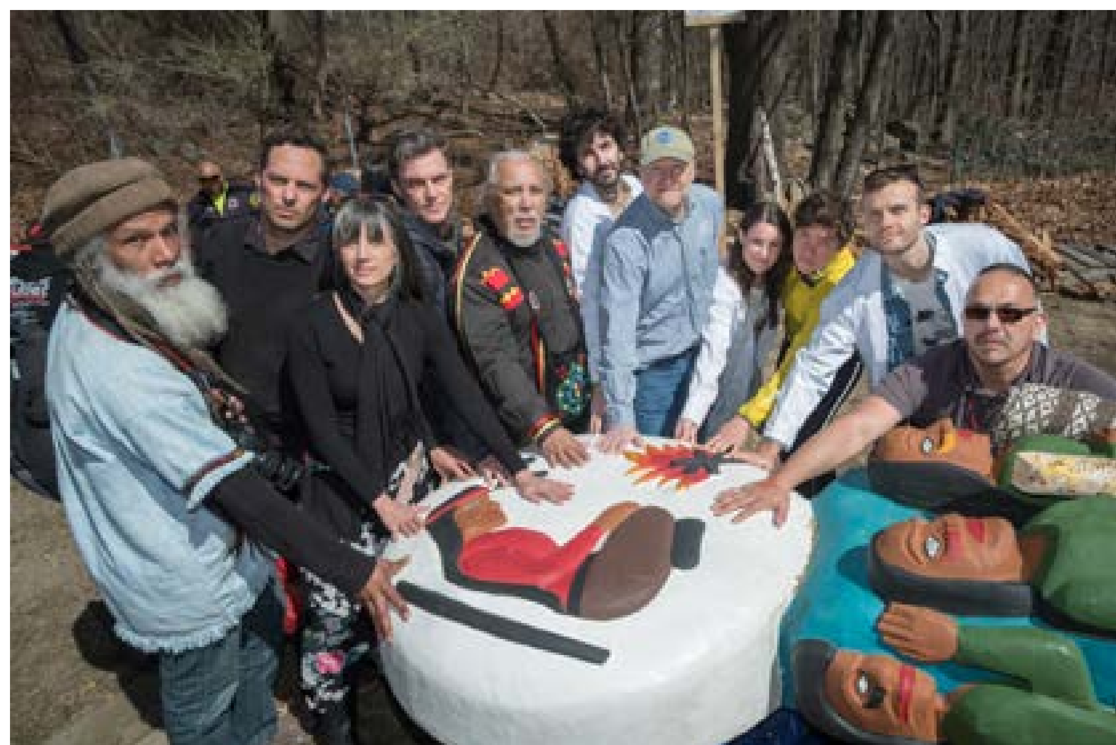
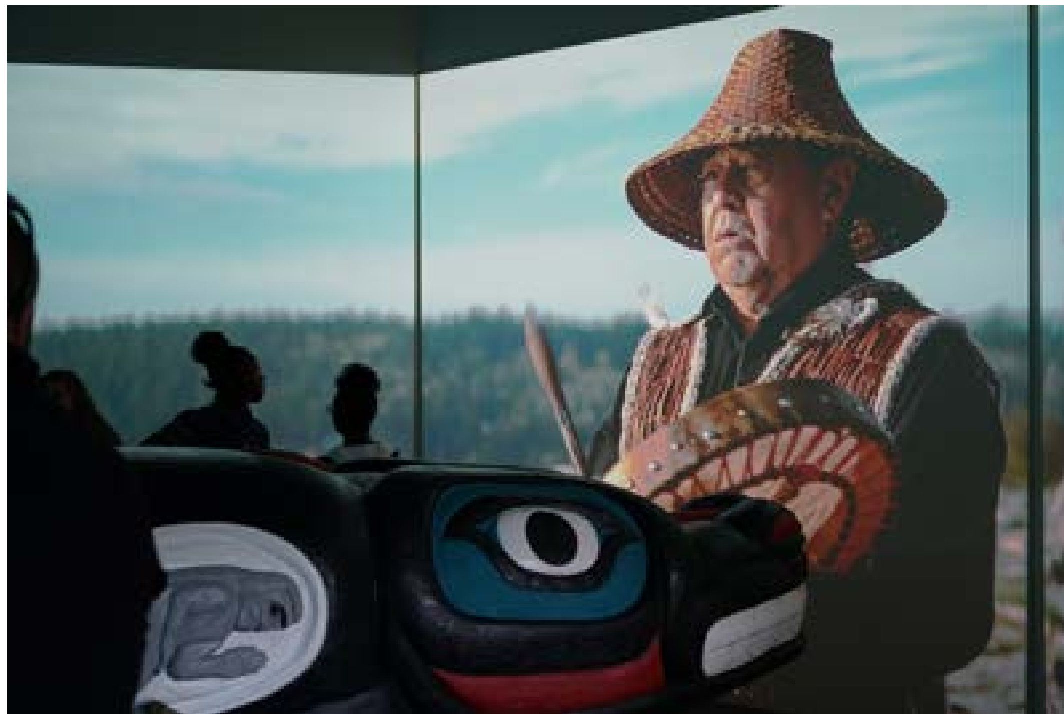


FIG. 10: *Kwel Hoy : Many Struggles One Front*, 2018, The Natural History Museum with the House of Tears Carvers of the Lummi Nation, Ramapough Lenape Nation, at the Watershed Institute, Princeton Environmental Institute and Center for the Humanities at CUNY Graduate Center. Co-sponsored by the Princeton Art Museum as part of "Migrations". Photo credit—Michael Palma

[30] Jason Jones justifies the decision of showing the totem pole horizontally: "Their interest was in communicating the totem pole journey as a series and not presenting an object, and this is the reason why we decided to show the totem pole on a trailer rather than vertically set up or on a pedestal or something like that, so the journey was being showed, and that was a big, a major trust building" (Economopoulos 2018; and Skype interviews with NAA conducted by the author, April and May, 2020).

[31] "The exhibition featured a totem pole carved by House of Tears Carvers; an ever-growing stone altar initiated by members of the Ramapough Lenape Nation and added to by members of the public contributing stones and prayers for the water; and videos and graphics that map the fossil fuel ecosystem, encompassing land, energy, economics and culture. It connected the science community's efforts



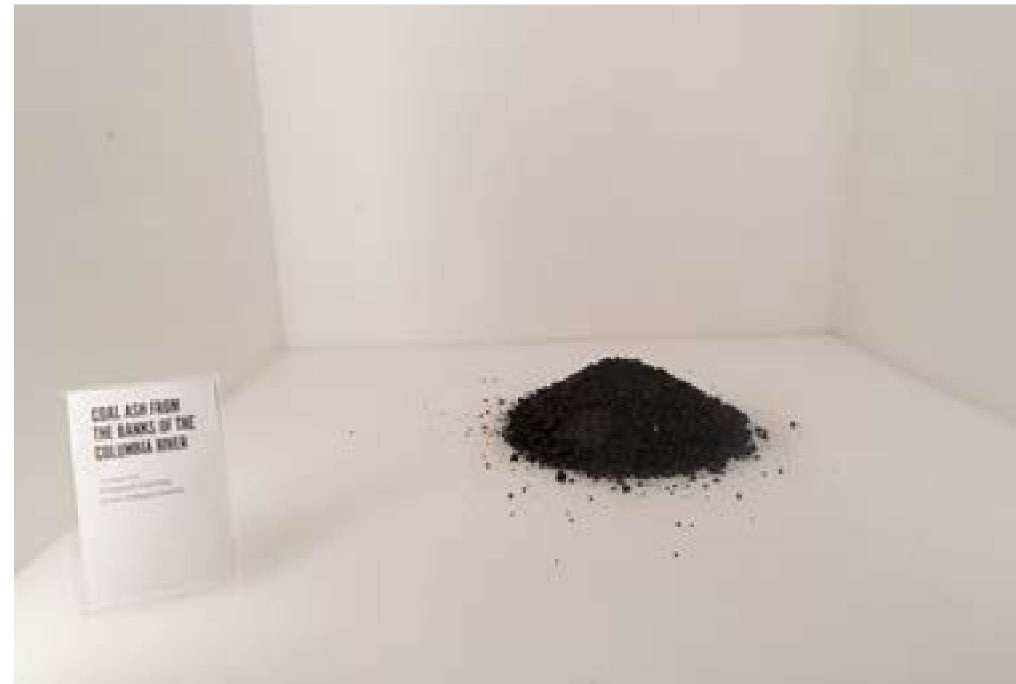


FIG. 12: *Whale People Protectors of the Sea*, December to May 2018, exhibition + Film by Lummi Nation and The Natural History Museum. View of multichannel video projection by The Natural History Museum, at the Florida Natural History Museum. Photo credit—Not An Alternative

FIG. 13: *Kwel Hoy We Draw the Line*, October 2017 to March 2018, view of object installation at the exhibition by the House of Tears Carvers of the Lummi Nation and *The Natural History Museum*, at the Carnegie Natural History Museum, Pittsburgh. Photo credit - Not An Alternative

food web, affecting the survival of Indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest. For the Lummi, the pole possesses the power of generations believing in a safe environment for humans, animals and plants as formed in a social body, not simply as *Nature*, but as a social whole that becomes a communion of interests between the different Indigenous communities.[32]

In his article "Artistic Autonomy and the Communication Society", Brian Holmes asks, "Shall we, then, abandon the museums?" His position is that museums should be used – occupied, in fact – "to generate decisive conflict over the kind of society they help produce" (Holmes 2004, 7).[33] Robin Boast reflects on the nature of the museum's *contact zone*, questioning the benefits of contemporary museological practices of collaboration. He draws upon James Clifford via Marie Louise Pratt's definition of contact zones, a "term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 1991:34) (Boast 2009, 2). Boast writes that transculturation and autoethnographic processes, as a neo-colonial rhetorical genre, prevent practices of collaboration from being equitable (Boast 2009, 8).[34] How can NAA's practice effectively challenge a neo-colonial mode of operating the *contact zone*?[35]

As transformers of the relationship between the museum and the communities with whom they collaborate, NAA ruptured the museum's operational rationale in both *Kwell Hoy* and *Whale People*, as a sort of occupation of the host institutions.[36] Although in partnership with the museum, they were able to assert their perspectives independently in terms of both content and finance, installing a political "camp" in it that prioritised the Lummi's social, historical and political interests, valuing the performatic complexity of storytelling and historical meaning in the collective public experience of the totem pole blessing ceremony. The production of the exhibitions and events in close proximity with the Lummi was informed by mutual interests, constant communication and interdependence. For *Kwell Hoy*, one of the video scripts was produced with and narrated by a Lummi Nation member, Freddy Lane, who was hired by NAA. According to NAA, Freddy Lane's participation was crucial for

to protect the local watershed from the proposed PennEast Pipeline to the nearby Ramapough Lenape Nation's struggle to stop the Pilgrim Pipeline, and the Lummi's struggles to protect the waters of the Pacific Northwest from oil tankers and pipelines. http://thenaturalhistorymuseum.org/events/kwel-hoy-many-struggles-one-front/

NAA describes the commitment and enthusiasm of the Lummi Nation for the partnerships with the museums: "The Lummi feel confident that these events are very important; it's not just the exhibition, it's the opening events, opportunities to leverage these exhibition platforms and big institutions to bring major leaders together" (Skype interviews with NAA conducted by the author, April and May, 2020).

[32] See: http://thenaturalhistorymuseum.org/events/whale-people-protectors-of-the-sea/.

[33] During the early stages of activist art, in which Lippard saw the conflict between aesthetic and politic effectiveness, she emphasised the importance of challenging institutions in order to change them (Lippard 1984, 324).

[34] Robin Boast critically revisited James Clifford's *Museum as Contact Zone*, from 1997, advocating for a practice that can change the contact zone as "a site in and for the centre". The author describes transculturation as a "process whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture". Also, in reference to autoethnography: "Autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with those texts" (Pratt 1991: 34).

them to remain in line with the Lummi culture. The nature of the interaction between NAA, the Lummi and the host museum is what potentially prevents a neo-colonial encounter in the museum's *contact zone*. Although immersed in a post-colonial context, the collaboration intends to challenge the reality of "institutions that created the ordered representations that contained, objectified and reduced the colonised world for the paternalistic imperialism that characterised the 19th and early 20th centuries", and the asymmetric space of science museums contact zones (Boast 2009, 11).[37] Their approach disarms a Western museological structure in which unbalanced power relations silence colonial stories of abuse, as the collaboration exposes it, bringing the message of the Lummi people to public scrutiny. This means rearranging the deficient contact zone of the one argued to be neo-colonial.[38] According to Jodi Dean this is not about a process of instituting based on alternative models away from institutional conflicts, as per Gerard Raunig's reflection on contemporary forms of interacting with the institution, away from the *arts of governing*.[39] Their singular strategy of conducting the critique empowers collectivity, raising the institution to the place where people govern, as Dean expressed at Manifesta 10.[40] NAA's liberation of the institution marks the arrival of the collaborative within the art's transversal quality, where its manifold, dynamic activities cross paths with the well-established institutional machinery of another field, in this case science. By finding the rift within it and forging alliances with certain members of the museums, they are able to counter its logic of operation, validating its societal potential and capacity for transformation.

Conclusion

Since 2000, NAA's projects have been aligned with Tania Bruguera's concept of *political timing-specific art*. "Political timing-specific art seeks to activate forces that already exist in the social and political landscape – desires and affects more usually manipulated by those in power", as exemplified in their Occupy actions, or recently the TNHM campaign to free the AMNH of Koch's influence, described in Part II of this article (Bishop 2019, no pagination). The TNHM is a culmination of intersecting interests, expressing people's concerns inside and outside of science institutions and participating in the overall movement for climate justice through collaboration with the Native American Lummi Nation.

For Bishop, these types of works are determined by a specific conjuncture, a matter of evaluating the multiple conditions of a moment in time and finding a future-forward way to respond to it (Bishop 2019). The museological institution, often seen as a neutral social structure devoid of political intention, is criticized this way by NAA´s modus operandi in the museum´s contact zone, affirming art as a matter of public use. For Cameron et al, museums today have the possibility to create new spaces and new types of intervention. Science institutions have been reinventing themselves in the context of the environmental challenges and within the context of a new museological movement initiated in the 1970s (Cameron 2013, 10, 15). As a cultural institution, the TNHM has been an important part of this reinvention, making science museums walk the art and activist path and simultaneously altering the authorial dynamics of the art produced – a two-way movement. The occupation of another field might alter societal dynamics, but it intentionally architects a ricochet that will also change the discipline of art (Holmes 2007, no pagination). Collectively, NAA envisions a different institution, not negating the original but rather liberating it. At present, art workers are better equipped to act on the junction between art and politics. Processes of institutional liberation are attempted once more, denoting a procedural transformation based

[35] James Clifford reflects on interactions between the Portland Museum staff and the Tlingit community elders, asking "How much could they decentre the physical objects in favour of narrative, history, and politics? Are there strategies that can display a mask as simultaneously a formal composition, an object with specific traditional functions in clan tribal life, and as something that evokes an ongoing history of struggle? Which meanings should be highlighted?" The author also voices concerns about the specific meanings associated with this encounter at the Portland museum (Clifford 1997, 13, 191).

[36] NAA explained that the message to museums that are hosting their intervention is very clear; to subvert the museum, to transform it. "We believe in museums, that they are very powerful institutions, and for that reason we are interested in joining with you, to make museums more important in this time." (Skype interviews with NAA conducted by the author, April and May, 2020).

[37] "This asymmetry is built, literally and figuratively, into our institutions (Chakrabarty 1992). They are determined by our funding regimes, by our proscribed professional practices, and in museums, by the very roles that we fulfil – collecting, documentation and display" (Boast 2009, 13).

[38] NAA explains that when there is a positive reaction to their proposals, it is worth to engage with the museum-- because although it may not represent the whole staff's understanding of political commitment, it is the split in the institutions that will allow for their intervention to happen. "I really do believe that there are institutions and people inside the museum sector who are real allies, and really invested and would love to see this sector changed, become less isolated as individuals and become part of some large collectivity but then there's also equally people in those institutions who are the voice of doubt, who loves to stay in the same position and find excuses why capitalism always control us" (Skype interviews with NAA conducted by the author, April and May, 2020).

[39] "Contemporary forms of institutional critique: transformations as ways of escaping from the arts of governing, lines of flight, which are not at all to be taken as harmless or individualistic or escapist and esoteric, even if they no longer allow dreaming of an entirely different exteriority" (Raunig 2009, xvii, 4, 5).

[40] For more on Jodi Dean's reflections on NAA's practice go to http://notanalternative.org/talks/. On Jodi Dean exposition of NAA's work at the Manifesta 10, St Petersburg, Russia, see 2014, The Split Institution: From Occupation to Counter-Power Infrastructure

on partnerships and collaborations, where the institution becomes a focal point of engagement towards modification, but this time within the natural sciences, ending the exclusivity of the art museum as the sole location of the art institution critique. The TNHM acts to liberate the institution from "a well-worn institutional model" as a way of questioning the nature of our relation to the institution (Scott 2013, no pagination). Although NAA's work is distinct from the direct confrontational work undertaken by indigenous communities on the frontlines of the struggle for social justice, it joins forces with such communities through other means, emancipating public cultural and educational institutions from petro-capitalist economics, sponsorship and propaganda.[41] NAA might be helping to redefine what Brian Holmes refers to as a *phase change*; the means, media and aims of a new phase of art institutional critique are not confined to the interstices of the institution itself or to the divisions of disciplines of knowledge, as their practice uses the art and the institution as a medium for visualising exclusion.[42] For public use, NAA´s project strategically builds the foundation of an emancipated society.

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[41] T.J.Demos succinctly describes the potential contained in collective intervention at the level of public cultural institutions, which, enhanced by collaboration, works towards its emancipation from petro-capitalist economics, sponsorship, and propaganda. Demos reflects on NAA's role in emancipating public cultural and educational institutions from petro-capitalist economics, sponsorship, and propaganda, emphasising their capacity "to mobilize collective forms of direct action towards transformative ends, defined by David Graeber as insisting upon acting in an unjust society as if one were already free, according to one's ethico-political convictions, as if the desired future is now" (Demos 2017).

[42] "How to create an institutional context that offers a chance of mutual recognition and validation for people attempting to give their particular skills and practices a broader meaning and a greater effectiveness?" (Holmes 2007). See also Holmes (2012, 83).

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