



First-of-Its-Kind Exhibition on Social Activism Explores New York City’s Dramatic 350-year History as a Focal Point of Social Activism

(New York, NY) – *Activist New York*, the inaugural exhibition in the Museum’s Puffin Foundation Gallery, examines the ways in which ordinary New Yorkers have advocated, agitated, and exercised their power to shape the city’s—and the nation’s—future. Centuries of activist efforts, representing the full spectrum of political ideologies, are illuminated through a series of installations featuring 14 New York movements ranging from the mid-17th century to today.

“Social activism has always played an integral role in New York’s history of perpetual transformation,” said Whitney Donhauser, Ronay Menschel Director and President of the Museum of the City of New York. “In our own time of dramatic political and social challenges, *Activist New York* connects visitors with New York’s earliest days of social activism to present the many compelling stories of how committed New Yorkers have led the way in bringing about social change.”

The exhibition features historic artifacts and images from the Museum’s celebrated collection as well as pieces on loan from other repositories and personal collections. Interactive elements throughout the exhibition provide opportunities to dig deeper into contemporary causes and campaigns. Visitors can see crowd-sourced photographs of activism unfolding throughout the city in real time, curated through the #ActivistNY hashtag. Touch screens invite visitors to explore the work of contemporary activist groups as well six original short video interviews with local activists.

The exhibition unfolds through a series of 14 examples of New York activism:

1. Let Us Stay: The Struggle for Religious Freedom in Dutch New Netherland, 1650 to 1664

An exploration of the questions of religious freedom, immigration, and diversity in New York from its earliest colonial iteration, featuring images from the Flushing Remonstrance, one of the earliest arguments for religious liberty and tolerance in American history.

2. Beware of Foreign Influence: Nativists and Immigrants, 1830 to 1860

This section explores efforts to prohibit or limit immigration and contain its impact on 19th-century New York. Nativists fought to curtail the largely Catholic immigrant community’s access to citizenship, the vote, and public office. The section also illustrates the ways Catholic New Yorkers combated nativism by establishing their own independent institutions to support their communities.

3. What Has New York to Do with Slavery? The Battle Over Abolition, 1830 to 1865

While New York City was a center of the abolitionist movement, it was also home to many people who sided with Southern slave owners. This conflict was dramatically revealed in the Draft Riots of July 1863, where the issues of class and race came to a head in a harrowing, violent confrontation. The exhibition chronicles the efforts of multiple sides of the debate.

4. Debating Vice: The Anti-Obscenity and Birth Control Movements, 1870 to 1930

New York City in the late 19th century was a hotbed of debate and conflict over sexuality, especially prostitution, nudity, and sexual reproduction. At the height of the Victorian era, anti-obscenity crusaders in New York outlawed abortion and prohibited the distribution of contraceptives. Many New Yorkers disagreed with the regulations and some helped roll back “Comstockery” by the 1930s.

5. Ratify to Repeal: Protesting Prohibition, 1914 to 1933

New York was the test case that ultimately proved the failure of Prohibition, the ban on the manufacture and sale of alcohol in New York City from 1914 to 1933. In addition to legislating alcohol, Prohibition touched on public health, class, gender, Progressive-era social reform, and the role of government. As an early “culture war,” Prohibition foreshadowed other debates over individual behavior that continue to this day.

6. I Am a Working Girl! Upheaval in the Garment Trades, 1900 to 1915

An examination of the events that led to reform and improvement of workplace conditions in New York and beyond, including the 1909 “Uprising of the 20,000,” an industry-wide strike by workers affiliated with the fledgling International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, and the 1911 Triangle Waist factory fire tragedy.

7. The Power of the Pen: The Proletarian Literary Movement, 1929 to 1941

This section explores connections between literature and politics in New York in the 1930s. During the Great Depression, a group of New York writers came to see novels, poems, and print culture as a tool to advance their agenda on behalf of the working class.

8. We Shall Not Be Moved: New York and Civil Rights, 1945 to 1964

An exploration of New York City's role in the early Civil Rights struggle of the post-World War II era, from local mobilizing around segregation in New York City housing and schools, to key organizing of national events such as the March on Washington, largely planned from Harlem.

9. Take New York City out of the War: Protesting Vietnam, 1965 to 1975

This section examines the city's central role in mobilizing against the Vietnam War, specifically the alliances between New York's longtime pacifists and a new generation of radical youth who sought to end the war and change the world. It will highlight the intersectional approach of the antiwar movement in New York, the role of New York's antiwar artists, and how conflict over the war created divisions across the city and beyond.

10. “Gay Is Good”: Civil Rights for Gays and Lesbians, 1969 to 2011

An exploration of how the Stonewall Uprising in Greenwich Village galvanized the modern gay liberation movement across the country, and how those activists and organizations mobilized against discrimination based on sexual orientation and the AIDS crisis in the ensuing decades.

11. A Future Worth Living: Earth Day and Environmentalism in the City, 1962 to 1990

This section examines the emergence of the environmental movement with the first Earth Day in New York in 1970, and traces environmental initiatives through the 1970s and 1980s in New York that established recycling, created community gardens, and opposed the disproportionate health hazards in working class and non-white neighborhoods throughout the city.

12. “Don’t Move, Improve”: Reviving the South Bronx, 1970 to 2012

The South Bronx became an international icon of urban blight in the 1970s. This section of the exhibition examines grassroots advocacy groups, community organizations, and church congregations that took ownership of the rebuilding of their neighborhoods into livable, affordable communities.

13. “A Danger Unlike Any Danger”: Nuclear Disarmament Campaigns, 1957 to 1985

This section explores the antiwar, peace, and environmental groups that converged in New York to advocate for the disarmament of nuclear weapons during the Cold War. In addition to being a key site of early nuclear weapons development, New York was the site of the anti-nukes demonstration on the Great Lawn in Central Park on June 12, 1982 that drew one million people.

14. Racial Justice Today: The Movement for Black Lives, 2012 to 2017

Since #BlackLivesMatter first appeared on Twitter as a rallying cry in 2013, New York activists have been integral to what has become known as the Movement for Black Lives, opposing systemic racism and connecting it with gender discrimination, health hazards, anti-immigrant sentiment, and economic inequality. In an era of heightened public protest, the movement has become a flashpoint for opposition and debate about the role of race in the 21st-century United States.

Activist New York: A History of People, Protest, and Politics, written by Curator Steven H. Jaffe and published by NYU Press, includes 16 chronological chapters focusing on specific historical episodes from the 1650s to the 2010s. In this illustrated companion book, Jaffe explores how New York and New Yorkers have changed the way Americans think, feel, and act.

Activist New York, which opened in 2012, was originally organized by Steven H. Jaffe Ph.D. and is curated by Sarah Seidman Ph.D., the Museum’s Puffin Foundation Curator of Social Activism.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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