Art, Protest, and the Archives of Activism (Saltaire, 12 Nov 25)

Victoria Hall, Saltaire, Henry Moore Institute, Nov 12, 2025
Deadline: Sep 15, 2025

Kirstie Gregory, Henry Moore Institute

Power for the People: Art, Protest, and the Archives of Activism.

Henry Moore Institute and Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture share a goal of documenting and preserving art in the public realm, exploring its histories and ensuring its future. This one-day conference will examine the role of protest and political activism in twentieth and twenty-first century art.

Bradford and Leeds have significant archival holdings relating to activist art. Henry Moore Institute is home to the Leeds' Archive of Sculptor's Papers, featuring documentation of Rose Finn-Kelcey's Power For The People of 1972, as well as Neal White's 2004 archival intervention The Third Campaign, which focused on the historical controversies around Jacob Epstein's sculptures commissioned by the British Medical Association. The Archive of Sculptors Papers also hold extensive papers on The Unknown Political Prisoner competition (1951-53), as well as artists whose practices more subtly challenge societal conventions including Helen Chadwick, Steven Cripps and Paul Neagu.

At the University of Bradford, the Department for Peace Studies was set up in 1973, and around it an independent library dedicated to documents of social change has since developed. The University's Special Collections department holds the substantial collection on Peace, Politics and Social Change. Amongst its many separate holdings it has the papers of sculptor and Quaker Barbara Bruce, artist Edith Durham's 'Balkan Sketchbooks', and Peggy Smith's 1930s drawings of "anybody who came to London to talk to the government or to speak". It also contains the original designs for the CND symbol, as well as other rich and wide-ranging collections dealing with creative approaches to protest and peace both in the UK and worldwide.

These collections form an archival background to more recent works by sculptors with varied and inventive approaches to political subjects. Some of today's most celebrated contemporary artists – ranging from Ai Weiwei to Nan Goldin, and Jeremy Deller to Forensic Architecture – are known for their political content. News and social media as much as art galleries and public squares are now part of our highly politicised cultural arena. So, what role should politics play in art today? How do we understand the porous boundary between mass protest and art making? What histories are sitting underappreciated in our archives and how can they guide us into the future?

Topics and themes of discussion:

We invite proposals which look at archives and art practices which centre or challenge the notion of sculpture as protest, or protest as sculpture, both nationally and internationally. Suggested subjects could include, but are not limited to:
- Documenting the sensorial and the ephemeral.
- The aesthetics of protest
- The role of the archive for halted or unfinished public art of protest
- Protest as material or subject in public art
- The role of the collective in protest art
- Re-examining civic histories through the archive.
- Curatorial approaches to protest
- AI the digital, protest and the archive
- Case studies of particular artworks and artists
- Archiving dissident artists and artworks
- Archiving the performance of protest

Submit a proposal:

We welcome submissions from a broad spectrum of critical and creative practice for individual 15-minute papers or a full panel. Applicants are kindly asked to submit:
- a brief abstract (no more than 250 words)
- a short biographical note (100 words)

The deadline to apply is Monday 15 September 2025, 17:00

Please email your proposals to: research@henry-moore.org

If you would like to apply in another format, such as video or audio, this is also welcomed. Please contact research@henry-moore.org if you would like to discuss this.

Speakers will receive an honorarium of £100, and travel and accommodation costs within the UK will be reimbursed.

Reference:

CFP: Art, Protest, and the Archives of Activism (Saltaire, 12 Nov 25). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 2, 2025 (accessed Nov 9, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/50452>.