

# THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW

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We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.

REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.,  
Riverside Church, New York, 1967<sup>1</sup>

Early in January 2016, President Obama spoke publicly about a number of new executive actions aimed to curb the American gun violence epidemic that claims more than 100,000 victims annually.<sup>2</sup> In his national address, the president spoke of this escalating violence in terms of “the fierce urgency of now,” an oft-used phrase in Martin Luther King Jr.’s speeches of the late 1960s. Then, King was speaking against the war in Vietnam. Today, the most pressing issues of our time—from gun violence to racial justice to wealth disparities to gender equity to war to migration to climate change—also call for urgency, and vigorous and positive action.

The artists, activists, and technologists featured in *Take This Hammer* demonstrate the unlimited possibilities for responding to today’s pressing challenges through a variety of tactics anchored in visual art, performance, action, and digital media. Each of the works engages different approaches, ranging from overt, radical political demonstrations to subtler creative gestures aimed at making visible the unseen personal stories at the heart of the issues. Several works demonstrate the ways that artists leverage digital media to engage with an expanded public online, while others draw from Internet resources to bear witness. Some works are built from spectacle, some from data. Taken as a whole, they demonstrate a spectrum of strategies for activism, political engagement, and participation in civic life.

The title of the exhibition is borrowed from the title of a 1963 documentary film, coproduced by KQED and WNET, featuring the novelist and social critic James Baldwin. In it Baldwin

considers life for African Americans in San Francisco in the early 1960s. Beyond drawing comparisons between past and present social conditions, situating this film in relation to so much contemporary media also aims to reveal the intertwined trajectories of public media and social media, and the significant role these platforms have held in providing space for public inquiry into challenging subjects. The title is additionally a nod to the idea of the German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht that “art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.” If art is a hammer with which we can shape culture, this exhibition is intended to instill in you, gentle reader, a sense of personal agency in collective change making.

In presenting this range of political engagement—and in considering the possibilities for even more—*Take This Hammer* endeavors to complicate conventional narratives around activism and the role of art in social change. Who is an activist? Anyone who chooses to heed the call. An activist, simply defined, is someone who campaigns for social change, and today this can be realized in any number of ways, from marching in the streets to launching a petition online. You could, right now, write or record or perform a message pertinent to your feelings about anything—the poisoned water in Flint, gentrification in Oakland, the death of Mario Woods—and post it on YouTube, SoundCloud, Vine, Vimeo, Facebook, Twitter, or any other such platform, and you will have taken a stand. Even the simple use of hashtags or changing one’s profile picture, sometimes derisively referred to as “slacktivism,” has come to demonstrate a kind of political influence. This is as yet difficult to quantify, but the organizing power of hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter is increasingly self-evident, and changing one’s profile picture can be seen as a nascent gesture toward holding a public position, and as an emboldening call to our expanded personal networks.

Such quick and simple gestures have of course come under fire for having an intrinsic relationship to a corporate agenda. The Internet isn’t a neutral space for public expression. Even as it mimics actual public space, it is in fact a predominantly corporate, privatized realm geared toward both surveillance and commerce through data mining, and virtually all of the social media platforms that engender public expression are also profiting from this engagement. (So-called public spaces are now also geared toward surveillance and commerce, are they not?) Yet small gestures online, when viewed collectively, can offer a magnificent portrait of solidarity, thanks to the medium’s unprecedented potential reach and connectivity. In the time preceding the legalization of same-sex marriage, Facebook published a map of the country depicting the number of people who changed their profile picture in solidarity with this movement, and it reflected a country blanketed in support for marriage equality, an image we might not otherwise have had.

Though they do not supplant sustained engagement with the issues in the communities where we live and work, digital media offer new points of entry into the conversation, as well as new ways of garnering impact. Now ubiquitous, camera phones have made video and photography accessible to a vast audience of participatory users of all ages and backgrounds. Combined with the myriad tools of the Internet and the potential for global connectivity via social media, they have become powerful assets in generating dialogue and, often, spurring real action. In recent years we’ve seen enough examples of police brutality recorded on personal

devices to know how effective this technology has been in impacting the conversation around systemic racism in this country. The evidence is indisputable.

In all likelihood, the world might not know the story of Eric Garner’s death at the hands of New York police officers had it not been for his friend Ramsey Orta recording it on his phone and the video going viral online.<sup>3</sup> Months later, following the grand jury’s decision not to indict the officers involved in Garner’s death, social justice organizers laid down on the ground in New York’s Grand Central Station in peaceful protest, a gesture that was immediately taken up in solidarity by bystanders and echoed in waves of protest around the country. People laid down in the streets, in schools, in stores, in government buildings. The spectacular images posted online by observers and participants circulated widely, generating more actions and responses, effectively blurring the boundary between offline “real life” activism and media activism. The increasing presence of hashtags in the protest signs of public demonstrations and in visual culture more generally further obscures the division between activism on- and offline.

Another example would certainly be the reversal of the Susan G. Komen for the Cure foundation’s plans to defund Planned Parenthood after an overwhelming number of people decried the announcement online in 2012.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the day after the initial announcement, nearly half a million people had posted responses to the decision online. By the end of the week, Twitter users had posted more than 1.3 million tweets on the topic. This pressure, and the negative press it generated, resulted in the swift reversal of the foundation’s decision. In the three days that it might have taken to organize demonstrations in so-called real life, the Internet had spoken and the Komen foundation’s decision had been crowd-corrected via the ether.

Early in the rise of social media, which was not that long ago, there was a popular tendency to discredit online activism in favor of traditional peopled protest. The writer Malcolm Gladwell wrote an extensive piece in *The New Yorker* in October 2010 dismissing the potential impact of online activism on these grounds, drawing on examples from the 1960s civil rights movement.<sup>5</sup> In hindsight, it may have simply been too soon to tell what results might arise from this new semipublic realm. We’ve since seen a range of activity that has undermined Gladwell’s position, including the rise of what has been called “a new civil rights movement” largely driven by media activism. Yet Alicia Garza, a cofounder of Black Lives Matter, remains adamant that this movement is not at all “new,” but rather a continuation of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and before. Today’s media activism, she and many others assert, represents new tactics, not new causes. The latest struggles for racial justice or gender equality or environmental protection are rooted in a long history of sustained engagement. There may be victories in the moment, but the movements are ongoing.

In situations where public opinion matters, the noise potential of digital media far exceeds that of pre-Internet era protests by virtue of global reach and repetition. (Everything lives online forever, we’re told, for better or worse.) And unlike the massive demonstrations of conventional activism that require a large cohort of participants, the Internet allows for the potential impact of a single voice or image to spark a larger dialogue or instigate a cultural shift. Case in point: in the immediate aftermath of the San Bernardino massacre, *Think Progress* editor Igor Volsky’s tweets exposing the NRA’s

hold on various politicians expressing impotent sympathies in the wake of yet another mass shooting forced a different conversation about the gridlocked politics of the gun lobby.

This power potential is just as accessible to a conservative schema as it is to a progressive agenda. As we approach this year’s elections, we increasingly see the same online platforms and methodologies leveraged on both sides of the political divide. Even as the tools of social media are presented as neutral, political power is often measured in bandwidth, giving the impression that whoever shouts the loudest appears to be winning. Speaking up has never seemed as important as it does now: to claim the things that matter to you, to find strength in numbers, to mobilize toward action. Progress is an ongoing struggle, as is a progressive agenda.

The message need not always be about what we are against. There is also powerful potential in envisioning the world we want to live in. The ability to foresee a world free from gun violence, for example, is how we begin to imagine achieving these ends, and this is not an impossible task; we know this because other countries have accomplished it. When you think about the world you want to live in, what do you see? This is the time—*right now*—to imagine the possibilities for a better future.

Sometimes it only takes one person to help us see how the world can be different. After the devastating racist shooting and act of terrorism at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston that left nine people dead, the artist and activist Bree Newsome climbed the flagpole at the South Carolina capitol building to singlehandedly take down the Confederate flag, a historic symbol of hate that held no meaning for the future. The images online of Newsome pulling down the flag were uplifting and empowering as a symbol of individual strength crafting the way forward.<sup>6</sup> Each of us possesses the potential to exert this kind of impact on the world we want to live in. Start with whatever you care most about in the fierce urgency of now. Start here. Take this hammer.

## Notes

1. Congressional Record Transcripts, May 18, 1967, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-ernest-gruening-mik-0>.

2. Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, “Key Gun Violence Statistics,” <http://www.bradycampaign.org/key-gun-violence-statistics>.

3. Amy Goodman, “Why Is Ramsey Orta, Man Who Filmed Police Killing of Eric Garner, the Only One Criminally Charged?” *Democracy Now*, January 12, 2016, [http://www.democracynow.org/2016/1/12/why\\_is\\_ramsey\\_orta\\_man\\_who](http://www.democracynow.org/2016/1/12/why_is_ramsey_orta_man_who).

4. Pam Belluck, Jennifer Preston, and Gardiner Harris, “Cancer Group Backs Down on Cutting Off Planned Parenthood,” *The New York Times*, February 2, 2013.

5. Malcolm Gladwell, “Small Change,” *The New Yorker*, October 4, 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell>.

6. Amy Goodman, “This Flag Comes Down Today: Bree Newsome Scales SC Capitol Flagpole, Takes Down Confederate Flag,” *Democracy Now*, July 3, 2015, [http://www.democracynow.org/2015/7/3/this\\_flag\\_comes\\_down\\_today\\_bree](http://www.democracynow.org/2015/7/3/this_flag_comes_down_today_bree).



Ina Veb, *Untitled*, 2013. Courtesy the artist and CultureStrike.