

Civil disobedience and political agitation: the art museum as a site of protest in the early twentieth century

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Abstract

This paper focuses on two examples of political protest which took place in museums in the early decades of the twentieth century: Mary Richardson's attack on Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* in London's National Gallery in 1914 and the 'rushing' and occupation of the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool by the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement (NUWCM) in 1921. In each of these cases, the museum was selected as a suitable site to make a political point. In both cases, the protestors utilized the space of the museum to further a political cause. Through a description of these two examples, and in addition to locating the public art museum as one amongst a series of potential sites of protest in the spatial networks of the city by the early twentieth century, this paper explores the motivations of the protestors in order to suggest certain perceptions of the Walker Art Gallery and the National Gallery which identified them as potential sites for political action. What becomes clear is that the unemployed workers and the suffragists occupied very specific subject positions in relation to these sites, subject positions which directly influenced their perceptions of art museums and their selection of art museums as sites of protest.

Key Words: Art museums, museum history, the museum as a site of political protest.

Introduction

This paper focuses on two examples of political protest which took place in museums in the early decades of the twentieth century: Mary Richardson's attack on Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* in the National Gallery in 1914 and the 'rushing' and occupation of the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool by the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement (NUWCM) in 1921. In each of these cases, the museum was selected as a suitable site to make a political point. In Liverpool the NUWCM was protesting against the levels of Poor Law relief given to unemployed workers and their families and at the National Gallery, Mary Richardson was protesting against the rearrest and imprisonment of Emmeline Pankhurst, who was by then on hunger strike in Holloway Prison. In both cases, the protestors utilized the space of the museum to further a political cause. This paper describes these two protests and locates the public art museum as one amongst a series of potential sites of protest in the spatial networks of the city by the early twentieth century. The paper goes on to explore the motivations of the protestors in order to suggest certain perceptions of the Walker Art Gallery and the National Gallery which identified them as potential sites for political action. What becomes clear is that the unemployed workers and the suffragists occupied very specific subject positions in relation to these sites, subject positions which directly influenced their perceptions of art museums and their selection of art museums as sites of protest. In addition to this, in both cases the space of the museum acted on the events that followed as the actions of the protestors were filtered through the universality of the museum, a process which significantly affected the meanings that would become attached to the protests more broadly.

In the case of Mary Richardson's protest, it was not an isolated event. The museum became a recurrent site for suffrage protests from one woman's rather low key protest in 'a



KEY TO ABOVE PHOTOGRAPHS OF KNOWN MILITANT SUFFRAGETTES.

Fig.	Name	Year	Height Fe. In.	Eyes	Hair.	C. R. O. Number.	Crime.
11.	Richardson Mary	1863	5.5½	Brown.	Brown.	S.168429.	Arson.
12.	Dennis May © Lillian Lenton.	1891.	5.2¾	Brown.	D. Brown.	S.167399.	Arson.
13.	Marion Kitty.	1872	5.5½	Blue	Auburn	S.168044.	Arson.
14.	Forrester Lillian.	1880.	5.3½	Grey.	Brown.	S.167641.	Damage.
15.	Johansen Miss.	1881	5.5½	Blue.	Brown	S.170105.	Damage.
16.	Given Clara.	1887.	5.4.	Blue.	Fair.	S.168045.	Arson.
17.	Baines Jennie.	1864.	4.10½	Brown.	D. Brown	S.165980.	Damage.
18.	Pratt Miriam.	1890.	5.7½	Blue.	Lt. Brn.	S.172271.	Arson.

Fig. 1 An identification portrait of 'known militant suffragettes' issued by the police and distributed to warding staff at the National Portrait Gallery. Courtesy National Portrait Gallery, London.

tremulous voice' at the opening ceremony of the newly refurbished Leicester Museum in 1912 (Anon. 1912: npp)¹ to a series of militant suffragette attacks including Bertha Ryland's attack on Romney's *Master Thornhill* in Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in 1913, Annie Hunt's attack on Millais' portrait of Thomas Carlyle in the National Portrait Gallery in 1914 and further attacks on five works by Giovanni and Gentile Bellini at the National Gallery in May 1914 (Nead; fn. 5, 113). There is no record in the Walker Art Gallery archive of the impact of the suffragette or NUWCM protests on the running of museums and galleries in Liverpool, although many museums and galleries across the country were either closed to women or closed completely immediately prior to the First World War (Atkinson 1996: 153; Nead 1992:35). The impact of the suffragette protests on museums and galleries was particularly significant in London; the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, the Wallace Collection, the Guildhall Art Gallery, Hampton Court and the collections at Windsor Castle were all closed following Richardson's protest in March 1914 (Anon. 12 March 1914: 6). A rule of 'No muffs, wrist-bags or sticks' was enforced in many galleries such as at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery where it was introduced immediately following Richardson's attack. And, at the British Museum, women could gain access if they were accompanied by a man or, if unaccompanied, could only gain access with a letter of recommendation from a gentleman (Atkinson 1996: 153; Anon. 12 March 1914: 6). In addition to the presence of police and plain clothes detectives in the National Gallery from early 1913, identification portraits of 'known militant suffragettes' were issued by the police in 1914 and were distributed to warding staff in the National Portrait Gallery (Nead 1992: 37) (**Figure 1**). In May 1914 the National Gallery, the Royal Academy of Arts and the Tate Gallery closed to the public following damage to, as Holmes and Collins Baker (1924: 73) put it, 'the helpless beauty of five Bellinis'. The National Gallery closure was initially indefinite with the Gallery only reopening following the declaration of war and assurances from Mrs Pankhurst that the campaign of militancy was over (Holmes and Collins Baker 1924: 74).

Even though their impact on museums was significant, these protests have not been considered in great detail in the literature discussing the history of British museums. Referring to the suffragette protests in an early history of the National Gallery, Charles Holmes and C. H. Collins Baker (1924: 73-4) lamented that museums and galleries were not immune to such protests, yet few subsequent histories have paid them any attention at all. Similarly, the NUWCM protest is largely omitted from histories of the Walker Art Gallery, presumably because such histories tend to emphasize the Gallery's internal management and development rather than place it in a changing social context. The Liverpool protest is however, present in more general histories of the city (Waller 1981: 290) including, perhaps unsurprisingly, histories of political radicalism (Taaffe and Mulhearn 1988). Most interesting of all, the NUWCM protest is discussed in detail in the memoirs and political writings of key participants in the event, namely Jack and Bessie Braddock² and George Garrett³ (Braddock and Braddock 1963; Garrett 1999). Mary Richardson's protest, far more notorious than the NUWCM's attempted sit-in, also attains mention in histories of the women's movement (for example, Atkinson 1996: 153), suffragette memoirs (Pankhurst 1959: 267; Richardson 1953: 165-70) and in feminist art history (for example Nead 1992: 34-43). The suffragette protests also appear in historical surveys of iconoclasm, although such histories, in their attempts to chart a form of human action across time and space, tend to draw attention away from the specific social and political contexts shaping them (Freedberg 1985; Gamboni 1997). Gamboni (1997: 190) for example, discusses the suffragette protests under the heading of 'political iconoclasm in democratic societies', whereas examples of iconoclasm in museums, in the main characterized by Gamboni as pathological and accounted for as a result of widening access to museums, are discussed in a separate chapter. Such a focus on iconoclasm not only obscures from view events such as the NUWCM protest but places the focus entirely on the moment and pathology of destruction. In light of recent engagements with the museum as a contested site, 'culture wars', issues of censorship and the politics of display however (see for example, Wallach 1998; Dubin 2001 and 2006; Sandell 2006), these events are worthy of closer consideration in terms of what they may reveal about the nature of the museum as a site of protest, that is a space selected alongside other public spaces as a location to make a political point.

With this in mind this paper begins from a focus on the museum as a site and a recognition of architectural space, interior and exterior, as productive of social relations. Rather

than treating the spaces of the museum as the backdrop to social life, and in this case two examples of political protest, this research acknowledges the architectural space of the museum as active in the shaping of social relationships and productive in the formation of social practices (MacLeod 2005). It asks, what was it about the Walker Art Gallery and the National Gallery that identified them as potential sites of protest?

Much has been written about the civilizing rituals of museums in the nineteenth century (see for example Bennett 1995). These new institutions would symbolise the civil society and generate civility across class and gender divisions through the benign and apolitical activity of looking at pictures (Bennett 1995; Hill 2005). By the early nineteenth century, extreme poverty, unemployment, social unrest and the highest death rates since the Black Death would demand a twofold solution: investment in the infrastructure of cities in order to combat the threat they posed to the health of urban citizens and the emergence of a political consensus (Colls and Rodger 2004). Whilst investment in the infrastructure included the building of railway stations, town halls, schools, wide city streets, public parks, libraries, museums and galleries, the emergence of a political consensus involved a shift away from a closed oligarchy towards a more democratic system and the shaping of the urban landscape, and the social actions that would take place there, around a dominant middle-class culture. Certain sites within the city then, would become as Steven Dubin has phrased it, 'sites of persuasion' (Dubin 2006: 478). Such sites would be characterized by universal access and would build upon notions of deference and moral inferiority present in the existing social relations.

It was then, no coincidence that an art museum or gallery would come to be recognized as an essential element in the new urban landscape. They spoke publicly of the cultured and civilized outlook of each town and the munificence of its leaders and offered opportunities to develop public architectures that would symbolize the civil society and encourage notions of citizenship (MacLeod 2005). These were, through civic celebrations, special exhibitions and events, active spaces for the formation, cohesion and projection of middle class identities and values. Through a policy of universal access, museums and galleries set out to provide opportunities for cross-class mingling and the moral improvement of the working classes in particular. Through all of this, they provided a public site for negotiation between classes, a place where society could come together and gain some sense of belonging to the larger community. Such belonging was not, of course, on equal terms, and any notion of citizenship was qualified by an individual's legal right to take part in politics, their economic worth, and their moral and intellectual capacity, all positioned according to the dominant and specifically male middle class values. These values validated the political exclusion of women and the social hierarchies that tolerated social inequity. However, as the comments above begin to suggest, museums must also be recognized as active, at some level, in the process of political democratization, one site in the series of public spaces in the late nineteenth-century city which enabled, by the early twentieth century, the politicization of women and working men. Indeed, it could be argued that the museum itself contributed in some small way to the conditions that resulted in the mass political protests of the first decades of the twentieth century.

The 'rushing' of the Walker Art Gallery

In September 1921, the Walker Art Gallery was 'rushed' and occupied by the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement (NUWCM). The NUWCM was formed in the years following the First World War when thousands of men had returned from the trenches to mass unemployment and poverty in cities such as Liverpool. Resentment set in and, led by the Communist Party of Great Britain, the NUWCM organized itself under the slogan of "Work or Maintenance" and an agenda for action centred on non-violent protest, tolerance and passive demonstration (Braddock and Braddock 1963: 32; Garrett 1999; Pridmore 2002). Its principal aim in Liverpool was to raise levels of Poor Law relief for families facing starvation. These, as illustrated here by the West Derby Union Board of Guardians, barely met the requirements of subsistence:

Minimum disbursement for those accepted as in need of Poor Law relief was a food order for 7/6d., but because the guardians often bought goods under contract and in bulk, its true value might be nearer 10/-. The minimum order for

a man, his wife and three children was 13/2d. The goods actually handed out to a man for himself, his wife and one child were: 6 oz. of cocoa, 16lb. of bread, 1lb. of syrup, 2lb. of rice, 1 lb. of soap, 1 lb. of margarine, 1 lb. of sugar and 4 oz. of tea.

No meat. No fuel. No money for the rent. The unemployed sold their possessions until all that remained were the clothes they wore (Braddock and Braddock 1963: 32; quoted from Garrett 1999: 186).

A series of demonstrations was organized in Liverpool. The first involved the occupation of the Exchange Flags, the paved area behind the Town Hall where the merchants conducted their business. The second protest took the form of a military-style march through the streets of the city. A third demonstration was planned for Monday 12 September 1921 on St Georges Plateau, the paved area to the front of St Georges Hall and adjacent to the Gallery. Participants, Jack and Bessie Braddock later recalled that following the speeches and frustrated by their lack of progress, the organizers of the protest, who included Bessie's mother, Ma Bamber, decided to take everybody to have a look at the pictures in the Walker Art Gallery. They were intent on staying there until the Lord Mayor gave permission for them to hold meetings in comfort in St. George's Hall. The crowd, reported to be 'the largest meeting yet held' (Garrett 1999: 198),⁴ was addressed by one of the organizers who is reported to have said:

I think we'll go for a walk... A short walk. It's too late for anything else. We'll all be art critics this afternoon. We'll go across and have a look at the pictures in the Art Gallery. Those places are as much for us as anybody else. They belong to the public (Garrett 1999: 199).



Police block the entrance to the Walker Art Gallery separating the 100 men inside from the main body of demonstrators outside.

Fig. 2 *The scenes outside the Walker Art Gallery during the 'storming' of the gallery in 1921. Liverpool Daily Post & Mercury, September 13th 1921.*

Initially about two hundred protestors entered the Gallery with a number, about fifty, immediately changing their minds and leaving (Braddock and Braddock 1963: 34). The events that followed were well documented in the Liverpool press. The men who remained in the gallery were shut in the vestibule by the police who arrived quickly and in number (**Figure 2**). Doors and windows were closed and the unemployed protestors, according to all reports, were given a severe beating. The *Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury* reported:

When an attempt to force an exit was made by those shut in the vestibule, the police drew their batons, and a brief but severe combat ensued... Many of the men, seeing the doors closed and the police guarding them, made an attempt to force their way out, and were struck down by the police. A number of visitors to the gallery who had been on the ground floor rooms before the appearance of the crowd found themselves trapped by the closing of the doors, and among them were several women, who were greatly terrified.

These people were let out through a back entrance by a member of the art gallery staff. Some of the unemployed probably escaped subsequently by back entrances, for those taken into custody or to hospital later on were fewer in numbers than had originally entered the building (Anon. 1921; also quoted in Braddock and Braddock 1963: 35).

George Garrett who had spoken at the rally and was then involved in what he described as the 'storming' of the Walker later wrote:

Inside the Art Gallery, more police caused pandemonium, men yelled aloud as they were batoned down. Others dashed around panic-stricken. A few desperate ones dropped from an open window into a side street and got away. Those attempting to follow were struck down from behind. The police closed all windows and doors. There were no further escapes. Batons split skull after skull. Men fell where they were hit. The floor streamed with blood. Those lying on it were trampled on by others who were soon flattened out alongside them. Gallery workers were battered, too. The police had gone wild (Garrett 1999: 200).

A trial followed with 161 defendants charged with a series of offences. In what is perhaps a rather romanticized version of events, the Braddocks likened the trial to the Keystone Kops, painting a picture of working class humour and solidarity against the oppression and heavy-handedness of the authorities.

The trial turned out to be real Mack Sennett stuff. One of the defendants, Johnny Flood, continually turned up late and continually found a good excuse. Once he complained that he hadn't the price of the tram fare, and had to walk five miles to the court. Next day he said he had pawned his only clock to buy the previous night's supper, and had mistaken the time.

George Garrett found himself in a group of men who had been discharged, and was thrown out of the court with them. Only after great difficulty did he persuade the police to let him back inside for his trial.

At this time there was a lot of talk – perfectly true – about money coming into the country from Russia. One of the defendants was asked: "Do you receive money from a certain government," and electrified the court by softly replying that he did. "What is the name of the government?" prosecuting counsel demanded. "The British Government. I'm on the dole," replied the defendant.

So it went on, the boys taking every opportunity to snipe at authority. In the end, Mr Hemmerde sentenced us all to one day's imprisonment, which meant that we were free. (Braddock and Braddock 1963: 39-40)

In 1948 the trial was immortalized at Liverpool Unity Theatre where Bessie Braddock played her mother (Dawson 1985: 74), an event which undoubtedly impacted in some way on the version of events recounted above. Nonetheless, the Braddocks' memoirs provide a rare and detailed description of the Walker protest by some of its key protagonists.

Mary Richardson's attack on Velazquez's Rokeby Venus

Seven years earlier, Mary Richardson entered the National Gallery in London and after spending some time standing in front of Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus*, produced what was described in the contemporary press as a 'chopper' from under her coat, smashed the glass, and struck the painting repeatedly. Richardson was apprehended by a gallery detective and arrested shortly afterwards. On 11 March 1914, *The Times* reported:

Miss Richardson, who was released under the "Cat and Mouse Act" in October last and has not since been rearrested, visited the National Gallery about 11 o'clock yesterday morning. She is a small woman, and was attired in a tight-fitting grey coat and skirt. She stood in front of the Rokeby Venus for some moments, apparently in contemplation of it. There was nothing in her appearance or demeanour to arouse the suspicions of the uniformed attendant and a police constable who were on duty in the room and were standing within seven or eight yards of her. The first thought of the attendant, when he heard the smashing of glass, was that the skylight had been broken; but a moment later he saw the woman hacking furiously at the picture with a chopper which, it is assumed, she had concealed under her jacket. He ran towards her, but he was retarded somewhat by the polished and slippery floor. The constable reached the woman first and seizing her by the right arm prevented her from doing further mischief. She allowed herself to be led quietly away to the inspectors' office (*The Times*, 11 March 1914: 9).

Richardson's own representation of events is described in her memoirs:

I dashed up to the painting. My first blow with the axe merely broke the protective glass. But, of course, it did more than that, for the detective rose with his newspaper still in his hand and walked round the red plush seat, staring up at the skylight which was being repaired. The sound of the glass breaking also attracted the attention of the attendant at the door who, in his frantic efforts to reach me, slipped on the highly polished floor and fell face-downwards. And so I was given time to get in a further four blows with my axe before I was, in turn, attacked.

It must all have happened very quickly; but to this day I can remember distinctly every detail of what happened...

Two Baedeker guide books, truly aimed by German tourists, came cracking against the back of my neck. By this time, too, the detective, having decided that the breaking glass had no connection with the skylight, sprang on me and dragged the axe from my hand. As if out of the very walls angry people seemed to appear around me. I was dragged this way and that; but, as on other occasions, the fury of the crowd helped me. In the ensuing commotion we were all mixed together in a tight bunch. No one knew who should or should not be attacked. More than one innocent woman must have received a blow meant for me.

In the end all of us rolled in an uncomfortable heap out of the room on to the broad staircase outside. In the scramble as we stumbled together down the stairs I was pillowed by my would-be attackers. Policemen, attendants and detectives were waiting for us at the foot of the staircase where we were all sorted out. I was discovered in the midst of the struggling crowd, more or less unharmed (Richardson 1953: 168-9).

Richardson was a known suffragette and her attack on the Velazquez reflects the increasing militancy of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) between 1912 and 1914. During these months suffragettes carried out a series of attacks intended to damage public and private property. As Sylvia Pankhurst would later write:

The destruction wrought in the seven months of 1914 before the War excelled that of the previous year. Three scotch castles were destroyed by fire on a single night. The Carnegie Library in Birmingham was burnt. The Rokeby Venus, falsely, as I consider, attributed to Velazquez, and purchased for the National Gallery at a cost of £45,000, was mutilated by Mary Richardson. Romney's Master Thornhill, in the Birmingham Art Gallery, was slashed by Bertha Ryland, daughter of an early Suffragist. Carlyle's portrait of Millais [sic] in the National Gallery, and numbers of other pictures were attacked, a Bartolozzi drawing in the Dore Gallery being completely ruined. Many large empty houses in all parts of the country were set on fire... Railway stations, piers, sports pavilions, haystacks were set on fire. Attempts were made to blow up reservoirs... One hundred and forty one acts of destruction were chronicled in the Press during the first seven months of 1914 (Pankhurst 1931: 544).

Richardson received the maximum sentence of six months imprisonment for damaging the Venus, although the sentence was never specifically served. As the quote from *The Times* above suggests, Richardson had been released from Holloway as a result of the 'Cat and Mouse Act' which enabled the release of women whose lives were at risk from prolonged hunger-strike. On her rearrest it was unclear which sentence she was serving (Nead 1992: 35).

Motivations: the art museum as a site of protest

The motivations of the NUWCM are difficult to pin down. The events on the 12 September 1921 followed the earlier marches where one of the key aims of the protestors had been to cause an inconvenience and a nuisance, to interfere with the day to day life of Liverpool in order to make their presence felt. Occupying the gallery would certainly cause an inconvenience and would interfere with its normal running. The decision to enter the Walker, in the accounts that are available from individuals directly involved in the protest, suggest that the decision was taken on the spur of the moment with no prior planning. Irritated by the mayor's reluctance to receive the delegation and keen for their third protest to be taken seriously, the organizers took the decision to act and create some kind of disturbance. Of course a number of public buildings could have been accessed around St George's Plateau: the County Sessions House, the Museum and the Picton Reading Rooms were all potential targets. However, some insight into the organizers' decision to target the Walker can be gleaned from a consideration of the range of sites within the city selected by the NUWCM as locations for protest.

The first of the three demonstrations had taken place in, as Jack Braddock phrased it, 'the most sacrosanct spot in all of Liverpool', The Exchange Flags (Braddock and Braddock, 1963: 33). George Garrett noted the direct challenge to the establishment posed by this choice of location:

To suggest the unemployed meet there sounded sacrilegious; it was doubtful whether a dozen men were likely to take the risk. Police hidden on the office stairways could swoop down on them without warning, and baton them to the ground before there was a chance to turn (Garrett 1999: 188).

The Flags were absolutely the preserve of the middle classes. Indeed, Garrett's description points beautifully to the role of architecture in the social division of the city:

The Exchange Flags, a closed-in quad with its venerable-looking buildings, had always been forbidden ground to the city's working men. Here the well-dressed merchants and brokers met daily in the centre, around a squat Trafalgar memorial to transact their business deals. The wide-domed Town Hall backed on to one side, its high windows uncurtained, while those of the buildings

opposite bore the gilded names of century-old firms. Arched passage-ways served as short-cuts to the busy streets roundabout, but were never used by workmen except those with a repair-job on the Flags (Garrett 1999: 188).

On the afternoon of the protest, not knowing who would attend, the organizers watched ten thousand men gradually make their way into the Exchange Flags. The memorial was converted into a rostrum for speakers and when a delegation of ten entered the Town Hall to speak to the mayor, the protestors moved around the front of the Town Hall where they were joined by thousands of others. Looking down from above, George Garrett, who we can only presume was one of the delegation, wrote of the organizers' realization of the power of the unemployed when massed together.

Encouraged by the spectacle of what has been estimated as some 30,000 men united in their cause, plans were set for the second protest in order that Liverpool could see 'so much poverty' (Garrett 1999: 193). What better location to expose the inequalities of society and to parade the abject poverty of Liverpool's 60,000 unemployed than Lord Street, the city's main shopping area. Here, the following Wednesday, twenty thousand unemployed workers, wearing yellow unemployment cards in their lapels, slow-marched through the streets. Many of the men wore war medals or tickets received in exchange for them at the pawnbrokers (Garrett 1999: 196). Illustrating their organization through the obvious military visual clues, the protestors made their presence felt by stopping the traffic and bringing the affluent Lord Street area to a standstill. For the unemployed workers to occupy the Exchange Flags and to join forces in Lord Street was to purposively step outside of the social relations of the city, to leave the hovels and slums and transgress the spatial order of the city by occupying spaces usually reserved for the more affluent classes. So what might this understanding tell us about the organizers' decision to 'rush' the Walker?

Like the majority of municipal art museums established in the last decades of the nineteenth century across the towns and cities of the industrial north and midlands, the Walker stood firmly for elite, and by the 1920s, rather old fashioned values. When the Walker opened in 1877 it proved extremely popular with a large number of middle and working class visitors. By the early decades of the twentieth century, the gallery was struggling to maintain its core audiences and the working classes had long ceased to visit in any great number (MacLeod 2007). Broad political and economic changes had rewritten the social relations of the city. The majority of working men had been given the vote by the 1880s although women were still excluded from the franchise. Following further legislation in the 1880s, political corruption and influence were reduced, and the politics of influence and market which had dominated prior to the political reforms of the 1830s, were gradually replaced with a politics of opinion. Deference had receded and what was commonly accepted as respectable behaviour had spread downwards and outwards (Garrard 2002). Standards of living for many had increased and new popular entertainments provided for the increasing leisure time of the standard family unit. Amidst all of this change, the Walker had become a static site, out of touch with the city (MacLeod 2007).

In many senses, like the Exchange Flags and the shops around Lord Street, for the unemployed workers the Walker was a semi-public site, openly accessible to all but symbolic of a very specific set of social relations. To occupy the Walker in number was to subvert the accepted social and spatial codes of the city. Even so, perhaps due to the events that ensued, the Art Gallery was certainly not presented as synonymous with authority by those directly involved in the protest. The scale of the police brutality ensured that public opinion was very much with the unemployed workers. Gallery staff were reputedly injured in the affray and gave evidence against the police at the trial, an institutional blow against the actions of the police that reinforced the moral high ground claimed by the unemployed workers (Garrett 1999: 211). That such brutality should take place within the precincts of the Gallery undoubtedly added to the horror and disdain that followed. The museum then, acted as a filter for the actions of the protestors impacting directly on perceptions of the events that ensued.

Mary Richardson's attack on the *Rokeby Venus* was somewhat more premeditated than the NUWCM's occupation of the Walker Art Gallery. National and regional art galleries were a specific target for suffragette protest in the years immediately preceding the First World War as

the WSPU turned to militancy. Similarly, the motivations of the suffragettes more broadly differed to those of the NUWCM. Primarily, the suffragettes set out to damage property, both public and private. As repositories of high profile, financially valuable material objects, art museums were prime targets. In the selection of the Velasquez, Richardson would clearly achieve specific aims of the WSPU. Damage to such a high-profile painting assured maximum publicity for the women's cause - the painting had been saved for the Nation by the National Art Collections Fund and presented to the National Gallery in 1906, and as such, was a national icon. In addition, such a high profile protest could directly affect the economy by instigating the closure of museums and galleries and damaging the tourist industry (Gamboni 1997: 96; Nead 1992: 35). The closure of museums was confirmed as a prime motivation by Christabel Pankhurst in her history of the women's movement:

Ubiquity, thy name is Suffragette! Our women were everywhere. They were at every public gathering, political or otherwise, calling upon the citizens of every sort and degree to remember votes for women and rescue from coercion the women rightly struggling to be politically free. Theatres and restaurants were visited by Suffragettes, with printed leaflets. Picture galleries, museums, and historic buildings were as far as possible shut and Americans and visitors from the Dominions, desiring to see art treasures and historic buildings, found this impossible 'because of the Suffragettes.' This was wonderful propaganda, for it made the disappointed sightseers think more deeply than before on the matter of votes for women (Pankhurst 1959: 270).

Alongside other high profile attacks, the damage to the *Rokeby Venus* would ensure notoriety for the suffragettes and keep votes for women as a political issue firmly in the public eye. As has been suggested by Lynda Nead however, Richardson's selection of the *Rokeby Venus* was far from arbitrary. Far beyond its financial and artistic value, the *Venus* embodied 'a certain kind of femininity and its position in the formation of a national cultural heritage' (Nead 1992: 36).

... even with our historical distance the choice seems inevitable: 'The *Rokeby Venus*', hailed as a paragon of female beauty, an exemplar of the female nude, a national treasure and worth a fortune – surely this combination of values and meanings distinguished it from other works in the Gallery, including other female nudes (Nead 1992: 37).

The *Venus* symbolized the patriarchal ideal of femininity; young, fertile and passive. Indeed, in the press coverage of the incident, Nead traces the demonization of Richardson and her location as precisely the opposite form of femininity to the *Venus*. As Nead writes:

All parties concerned in the incident – the Gallery, Richardson and the press – were willing to represent it in terms of the conflict of two opposed forms of femininity: the patriarchal ideal (the *Venus*) and the deviant (the militant suffragist) (Nead 1992: 37).

To attack the *Venus* was to strike a blow against the dominant patriarchal culture and the position allocated to all women in that culture. But Richardson's comments after the attack point to further motivations and the potency of the National Gallery as a site for protest. As Richardson was led away from the scene of the attack towards the constable's office, she was reported to state, 'Yes, I am a suffragette. You can get another picture, but you cannot get a life, as they are killing Mrs Pankhurst' (*The Times*, 11 March 1914: 9). Richardson recognized the hypocrisy of a society which would value an inert object over a human life and, more broadly, over the emancipation of women. In the National Gallery, the premiere site for the accumulation of society's highest artistic achievements, the inequalities and inconsistencies of society were thrown into relief for Richardson. And in the '*Rokeby Venus*', viewed by many to be the most

beautiful woman in the world, the horror of Emmeline Pankhurst's plight was writ large. In a statement to the WSPU immediately following the attack Richardson explained:

I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government for destroying Mrs Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history. Justice is an element of beauty as much as colour and outline on canvas. Mrs Pankhurst seeks to procure justice for womanhood, and for this she is being slowly murdered by a Government of Iscariot politicians. If there is an outcry against my deed, let everyone remember that such an outcry is an hypocrisy so long as they allow the destruction of Mrs Pankhurst and other beautiful living women, and that until the public cease to countenance human destruction the stones cast against me for the destruction of this picture are each an evidence against them of artistic as well as moral and political humbug and hypocrisy (Quoted in *The Times*, 11 March 1914: 9).

Richardson recognized the symbolic power of the *Rokeby Venus* and the outcry that would be caused by its destruction. To target this particular work was a direct attempt to shame politicians and public alike for valuing an image and a symbol over a human life. It was however, the presence of the *Venus* in the National Gallery that added to its potency as a symbol. If the National Gallery was widely recognized as a site where society's highest artistic achievements were collected and stored, it was also a utopian site where society's ideal vision of itself was displayed and legitimized (McClellan 2002). As Nead suggests, beyond the notion of femininity embodied in the *Venus*, it also symbolized the position of the patriarchal ideal of femininity in a national cultural heritage. In the collections and displays of the National Gallery, such notions were reiterated and legitimized. To strike a blow against the '*Rokeby Venus*' was, as Nead makes explicit, to strike a blow against the patriarchal ideal. To do so within the confines of the National Gallery, was to effect a strike directly at the dominant values and vision of society so far removed from the suffragists own vision of the world and their experiences as women. Once again then, the museum acted as a filter for Richardson's actions, adding weight and meaning to her protest whilst at the same time amplifying public disapproval.

As at the Walker Art Gallery, the values and social relations inscribed into the stories accumulated in the National Gallery relied upon the acceptance and adoption of specific subject positions and forms of behaviour on the part of visitors. Richardson's own description of the protest outlined above works hard to portray the furore that surrounded her arrest. Whereas the NUWCM transgressed the spatial codes of the city by simply asserting their presence *en masse* in the Walker Art Gallery, Mary Richardson publicized her beliefs and the suffrage cause by entering a social space much frequented by her social grouping and shattering its accepted codes of behaviour. In a space where middle class women could move unnoticed and where identification portraits of 'known militant suffragettes' were required to single out potential protestors, attention focused not on the space itself, but the social truths it set forward.

Conclusion

In the first decades of the twentieth century, as the still relatively new phenomenon of opinion-politics led to a proliferation of political protests (Bagguley 1991; Garrard 2002), a number of protests took place which marked the civic art museum out as a target for direct political action - a public space where political agitation could be played out. In both the examples considered here, the protests were part of a larger series of demonstrations taking place across a range of public, and in the case of the suffragettes, private spaces. Nevertheless, the museum was a legitimate and important site for protest due to its location and identity as a universally accessible public space, centrally placed within the spatial networks of the urban landscape. Here, powerful political protests could be made due to the nature of the public art museum as a key site for male middle class identity and authority and for the civilized values it claimed to uphold. Indeed, in both examples discussed here, the universality of the art museum acted as a filter for protest, directly impacting, albeit in very different ways, on the meanings and messages the protests created and the public perceptions that followed. Whereas in Liverpool the choice of site for the protest amplified the brutality of the attack on the protestors placing

them very much on the moral high ground, at the National Gallery the choice of site added to the power of Richardson's protest and the vehement public disapproval of her actions.

What also becomes clear, however, is that the suffragists and the unemployed workers occupied very different subject positions in relation to the Walker Art Gallery and the National Gallery. For the unemployed workers, the art gallery in Liverpool was absolutely the preserve of middle class values and was symbolic of the unemployed's marginal position in society. To occupy the Walker *en masse* was to transgress the social relations of the urban landscape, to make themselves and their cause visible by moving beyond the accepted spatial codes of the city. For the suffragists, the majority of whom were middle class, the art gallery was a part of their social experience, a space they frequented, where they could move around unnoticed and where identification portraits were needed to single out potential offenders. For these women, the social values brought together and legitimized in the museum symbolized patriarchal culture and the social relations mapped onto the space of the art museum clashed with their vision of the world and experiences as women. For Mary Richardson in particular, the utopian character of the art museum, its identity as a site for the accumulation of society's highest achievements and for the representation of society's ideal vision of itself, threw into sharp relief the poor and unreasonable treatment of women and the brutality of Emmeline Pankhurst's plight. If she gained little sympathy from the broader public, she did make a powerful political point. Interestingly however, and as this paper begins to suggest, the art museum is also implicated in the creation of a politicized mass public and it remains fascinating to consider how museums have acted not simply as sites for protest, but how they have contributed to the creation of a civil society where political debate, and occasionally agitation, is a necessary part of the progress of democracy.

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Notes

- 1 Thank you to Cynthia Brown for this reference.
- 2 Jack and Bessie Braddock were both active trade unionists in the Liverpool area. Bessie Braddock went on to be Labour MP for Liverpool Exchange for over twenty years, actively campaigning for Liverpool's poor. Jack Braddock would become leader of Liverpool City Council.
- 3 George Garrett, who was out of work for many years, was an active member of many left-wing movements, including the NUWCM. He wrote a number of political pamphlets and songs. See Pridmore, *George Garrett* for a review of his works and links with American labour movements.
- 4 This would put the crowd at over 30,000. Interestingly however, the *Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury*, 13 September 1921 reported the crowd to number around 4000, p. 5.

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