

ACTIVATE - "POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND MATERIAL CULTURE: DEFINITIONS, PRACTICES, PERIODISATIONS. A DIALOGUE BETWEEN RESEARCHERS, ARCHIVISTS AND MUSEUM CURATORS"

Call for Paper | ACTIVATE WP3 Workshop #1

May 4-5 2026
University of Padua and online

This workshop aims at bringing together academic, archival, museum partners with specific expertise on the relationship between politics and material culture. In recent decades, historiography has undergone a 'material turn' that has led to a less asymmetrical focus on the relationship between human and non-human, in particular objects and artefacts. This has produced new perspectives on the construction of social

identities, the experiences of consumption and the trajectories of everyday life. At the same time, less attention has been paid to the “material history of politics” focusing on objects as key elements of political mobilisation. From the late 18th century revolutions to the recent Gen Z protests in Nepal, Philippines or Madagascar, the process of politicisation has been expressed through 'disobedient' objects, capable of evoking, striking and provoking in a politically significant way. Physical objects can play all sorts of roles in collective action, as we have seen in many recent movements, where material participation has been particularly widespread and important. The main objective of this workshop is to look at the history of militant culture by focusing on a scarcely developed aspect: the link between political experience and material culture. It aims to do so by promoting close cooperation between researchers and those involved in collecting, cataloguing and exhibiting such documentary material.

Workshop topics:

1) Definition of political/militant objects

How to define political objects from the perspective of historians, archivist and museums? What makes an object political, and specifically militant? What objects has political activism imagined and used in its long history, stretching from the age of revolutions to the present day? This question is particularly interesting in relation to objects that do not appear political at first glance. Are objects like Annemarie Renger's dancing shoes or Margaret Thatcher's handbags political objects? Bras and false eyelashes are certainly not political objects, but they became so in the feminist struggles of the 1970s. The issue is closely linked to the uses and practices that these objects generate from time to time and to the different forms of material participation that they entail, even in everyday life. It allows us to reflect on different chronologies and phases of political activism, focusing on four themes: revolutionary movements; feminisms; environmental struggles; international solidarity.
A definition of political objects should go beyond time periods and materiality and also address the political dimension of everyday objects.

2) History and methods of collecting militant objects

Since the late 18th century, revolutions and protests, as well as party and grassroots mobilisations, have shown that social and political activism often leads to the preservation of material objects bearing witness to the engagement of individuals, groups, and associations.

Archives, like historiography, have so far focused more on written holdings than 3-D objects and are now facing a new challenge. Museums, especially historical ones, are certainly more accustomed to collecting objects, especially those with recognized historical-artistic value. Yet political and militant objects often lack such value. How were collections formed that related to activism? Where, by whom, and for what purposes were they kept? When were they turned into heritage? What country-specific differences exist with regard to the history of collecting militant objects?

3) Cataloguing and preparing metadata

Objects need to be catalogued for making them accessible to research. Therefore, questions about cataloguing and enriching metadata a central: How can a political object be described – WHAT is an object, HOW is it catalogued, and HOW does it fit into archive /library and museums structures? How do museums and archives identify and record political objects in their collections? What parameters are used to define political objects, and how is this reflected in the metadata? Which (national) standards such as ministerial requirements for metadata standards for object cataloging are used at the respective institutions that are applied during cataloging and what perspectives and problems arise due to the different nature of the description: use of data fields and how do they correspond to standards known from the archival sector, are there interfaces?

4) Preserving, reproducing, and enhancing material sources

How should different materials be handled? Paper is generally patient when stored properly, but how should fragile materials such as textiles, which are not made to last forever, be handled? Different materials place different demands on packaging, climatic conditions, and storage. Archives and museums face the challenge of preserving these materials in the long term. Dealing with objects that are irrevocably subject to decay is also a challenge that particularly affects AV materials and forces many institutions to act. Digitization is not a solution to this problem, but a resource that gives objects a second life and new uses, providing novel means of access, consultation, interpretation, and valorization. To date, militant objects have rarely been central to heritage valorization projects: thus, beyond their potential to renew historiographical narratives, they also promise to reshape how archives and museums present their collections and narrate their history.

We encourage researchers, archivists, and museum curators to submit papers addressing these topics either from a theoretical and methodological perspective or by

presenting specific case studies or experiences.

Please submit your proposal, with a maximum of 3,000 characters including spaces, along with a brief CV, by 28 January 2026 to this email: activatewp3@gmail.com

» **Click here to download the call for papers**

INFORMATIONS COMPLÉMENTAIRES

About the project:

This workshop is part of the project “ACTIVATE: The activist, the archivist and the researcher. Novel collaborative strategies of transnational research, archiving and exhibiting social and political dissent in Europe (19th-21st centuries)”. ACTIVATE receives funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2023 research and innovation program under the Marie Skodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101182859.

The project was launched in January 2025 and explores in a 4-year initiative practices of collecting, archiving, and promoting documents, objects, and data, contributing to a renewed European history of social and political dissent from the early 19th century to the present day.

Further information about the project is available at https://activate-horizon.eu/

Organizing Committee:

Carlotta Sorba (University of Padua)
Anja Kruke (Friedrich Ebert Foundation)
Laura Valentini (Friedrich Ebert Foundation)
Alessio Petrizzo (University of Padua)