

21079 Putting the Trump baby balloon in a museum could help make his ideas history

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No sooner had the Iraqi journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi thrown his shoes in protest at the US president George Bush than people were calling for the offending items to be displayed in a national museum. Unfortunately US security forces destroyed them while checking for explosives. Luckily, the Trump baby balloon dodged a similar fate in July 2018, when it floated above crowds that had gathered to protest the president's visit to the UK.

Ahead of Trump's departure from the White House, the activists who designed the baby have decided to donate it to the Museum of London. The balloon will sit alongside ephemera from the movements led by the suffragettes and Chartists. Still, unlike these causes, the fight against Trump and everything he stands for – from rising inequality to the pollution of public discourse and the rise of the far-right – is far from over.

There's a risk that by placing a piece of contemporary protest art in a museum, we create a false sense of security that this chapter in history is closed.

Museums often acquire artefacts when they are far from historical – many of the items at the Museum of London related to the suffragettes were donated when the fight for women's franchise was still going on. Recently curators have acquired signs from the anti-austerity demonstrations and the Black Lives Matter protests.

Cultural institutions aren't neutral actors in this process. In the UK, museums offer free entry and provide a space for people to encounter stories outside of their own experiences. Increasing accessibility is essential for political art: not everyone has the means or inclination to protest, and by exhibiting such objects outside of their original context they reach the widest possible audience.

Leo Murray, the balloon's designer said "it created a sense of collective endeavour." By putting the baby in a public space, there's an opportunity to share this spirit more widely – because if anything is going to change for the better, a sense of unity and common purpose will be vital.

We're yet to see how Trump's legacy will play out, and how an emboldened far right will take its fight forward, but the baby will exist as inspiration for how to resist it.

The story goes that in the 19th century, access to museums was promoted to divert working-class leisure time away from seditious activities; now we need them to catalyse further change.

396 words