

HYPERALLERGIC

NEWS

Activists Protest at Whitney Museum, Demanding Vice Chairman and Owner of Tear Gas Manufacturer “Must Go”

Members and supporters of activist group Decolonize This Place emphasized that Warren Kanders is only a symptom of a larger problem.

Ilana Novick, Hakim Bishara December 9, 2018



70-80 protesters gathered at the Whitney this Sunday, December 9 (photo by Ashoka Jegroo/Hyperallergic)

“I’d rather see this than Andy Warhol any day!” a young Whitney visitor exclaimed to her friend Sunday afternoon, as she sprinted from the museum door to the lobby. As the atrium slowly filled with the scent of burning sage, protesters shouted, “We will not be silent” and “Decolonize this place.”

Members and supporters of activist group Decolonize This Place, alongside curious onlookers, arrived outside the Whitney just after noon. Visitors hoping for a selfie with Marilyn Monroe or a Campbell’s soup can print were treated to art of a different kind.

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The atrium was crowded with activists (photo by Ashoka Jegroo/Hyperallergic)

against Warren B. Kanders. Kanders is a Vice Chairman on the Whitney Board of Directors, and the owner of Safariland, a tear gas manufacturer whose products were used on immigrant families approaching the US-Mexico border, seeking asylum in the United States. He was also among those who provided "significant support" to the blockbuster Andy Warhol exhibit, *From A to B and Back Again*, according to the exhibition's web page.

"The immediate goal is that Warren Kanders must go," said Marz Saffore, a member of Decolonize This Place. Saffore emphasized, however, that Kanders is only a symptom of a larger problem. Saffore continued, "That does not mean that there aren't dozens and dozens of other issues within the board of trustees at the Whitney, or within the way that the Whitney shows art or who curates the art."



Activists burned sage in the museum atrium (photo by Hakim Bishara/Hyperallergic)

Armed with colorful banners reading messages like "WHITNEY MUSEUM: NO SPACE FOR PROFITEER OF STATE VIOLENCE," drums, a cowbell, and the aforementioned burning sage, protesters gathered on what one member aptly described as "a cold ass Sunday," to lead a protest

The protest, according to organizers, was in solidarity with but separate from the nearly 100 Whitney staff members who signed a letter expressing their dismay at Kanders's presence on the board and requesting a new policy around trustee participation in exhibitions.

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In response to that letter, Museum Director Adam Weinberg wrote in a statement: “Even as we are idealistic and missionary in our belief in artists — as established by our founder Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney — the Whitney is first and foremost a museum. It cannot right all the ills of an unjust world, nor is that its role.” Weinberg also called the museum “a safe space for unsafe ideas.”



Sign reading, “Tear gas is deadly” (photo by Ashoka Jegroo/Hyperallergic)

says Garcia, “infantilizes and insults” the pain that her community is going through at the border.



Activists gathered at the museum entrance (photo by Ashoka Jegroo/Hyperallergic)

Maria Garcia from Comite Comadre, a group that supports asylum-seekers and fights against deportations, told Hyperallergic that the museum’s claims to be “a safe place for unsafe ideas,” as stated by Weinberg, is “a slap on the face of their workers and the public at large.” Weinberg’s response,

To help spread the message of that pain, organizers fanned out across the plaza in front of the museum and at the entrance to the Highline, handing out flyers that read, in part:

are not even protected. need ad like Saer

Attack just shows say
is uncomfortable and there
is a link to them

Need we remind Weinberg that "the laws of society" have included the legal sanctioning of slavery, the Indian Removal Act, Jim Crow laws, and indeed the entire juridico-economic regime of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and capitalism that underpins contemporary US society?

AFAO

We say to Weinberg: We are not fools. We know law is not justice. Your statement makes it clear which side you are on: the side of Safariland, and this we simply cannot accept.

Passersby were largely receptive, stopping to ask the protesters questions and to take pictures and videos of them, even following protesters into the museum's lobby around 1pm. Museum security tried to hold back the group with a series of lines, supposedly for a bag check, which ultimately failed when around 70 protesters pushed past the guards. They formed a circle that eventually overflowed the space between the gift shop and the ticket desk and lit sage, sang, chanted, and a series of speeches were delivered from members of the American Indian House, the Bronx-based Hydro Punk movement, and the New Sanctuary Coalition.



A protester holding a sign depicting asylum seekers and tear gas (photo by Ashoka Jegroo/Hyperallergic)

Shellyne Rodriguez, a member of Decolonize This Place, told Hyperallergic that she felt compelled to protest today because, "If we do not shock and awe this museum with our anger and our rage, then we're saying it's okay. Who's going to be the next person on the board? One by one, we need to hold these people

accountable. It's about time we start questioning where our philanthropy comes from."

Rick Chavolla from the American Indian Community House in New York City, a nonprofit representing Indigenous communities in the city, told Hyperallergic, “Finding out that [Kanders] is CEO of Safariland was incredibly sad for us. Admittedly, it angered us to know that it’s someone who is responsible for tear-gassing our own Indigenous people in Standing Rock, and more recently, on the border.” The American Indian Community House has an ongoing collaboration with the Whitney Museum, a series of monthly events named “Socials,” which highlight Indigenous culture.



The atrium of the Whitney this afternoon (photo by Ashoka Jegroo/Hyperallergic)

The recent revelations, says Chavolla, put the next “Social” event, scheduled for February 22, 2019, in question. “We have to be able to move forward in a way that we know that the museum is conscious of who their leadership is ... If the Whitney Museum is not going to find a way to change that leadership, we

are really going to have to rethink our ongoing relationship with them.”



Firefighters at the Whitney (photo by Ashoka Jegroo/Hyperallergic)

Around 1:30pm, the fire department arrived, apparently because of the increasing layers of smoke. Protesters were undaunted, shouting “Fire! Fire! Fire to the colonizers!” and demanded that if the sage were, in fact, a fire hazard, that they be allowed to put it out themselves.

Eventually, the protesters relocated, and the action continued peacefully back outside.

Whitney representatives did not offer comment when reached prior to Sunday's event and have not yet responded to followup requests.



The activists arranged their banners across the museum steps (photo by Ashoka Jegroo/Hyperallergic)



The steps surrounding the Whitney (photo by Hakim Bishara/Hyperallergic)



An activist participating in the protest (photo by Ashoka Jegroo/Hyperallergic)