

HYPERALLERGIC

After Kanders, Decolonization Is the Way Forward

Activist organization Decolonize This Place believes “the museum can be made responsive to people rather than to the dictates of capital, that it can foster creativity and memory rather than functioning as a tool to launder the reputations of the ultra-wealthy.”

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Decolonize This Place’s Nine Weeks of Art and Action at the Whitney Museum of American Art (courtesy of Andres Rodrigues/Decolonize This Place)

Last week, Warren Kanders was forced off the board of the Whitney Museum of American Art. We celebrate this win, and we acknowledge the work of everyone who contributed to this outcome over the course of eight months of organizing and action. We send a shout out to the museum workers who first spoke up against Kanders; the journalists who broke the story and have been covering the crisis; the single artist who declined to participate in the Biennial before it opened; the scholars and artists (including 52 of the 75 Biennial participants) who supported the demand to remove Kanders through an open letter; the community groups, art collectives, and all those who mobilized every Friday at the museum for Nine Weeks of Art and Action over the course of the spring; and most recently, the authors of “The Tear Gas Biennial,” who set the stage for eight artists to withdraw their work from the Biennial last

week. The removal of Kanders was achieved by using a diversity of tactics, enabling us to move together without assuming unity.

We have been asked, “What comes next?” We see the removal of Kanders as one step in an ongoing project of decolonization. This project includes the Whitney and the broader art system itself, but necessarily exceeds both.

Today, we write from the perspective of artists and organizers working to build a decolonial movement across New York City and beyond. We and dozens of collaborating groups came together at the Whitney because we saw our own specific struggles amplified in the struggle against Kanders, from the Bronx to Brooklyn, from Palestine to Puerto Rico. We should remember that mobilizing against Kanders has not just been about artwashing or toxic philanthropy — it has also been a fight against the violence directed at our communities and movements. Along with bullets and handcuffs, batons and body-armor, the tear gas made by Safariland is a weapon of counterinsurgency, designed for use by police forces, prison guards, militaries, and border patrols, to literally beat down and choke our efforts at liberation.

The demand to remove Kanders has been both a platform for movement-building and a gateway to effect deeper changes in the power relations of an art institution whose business-as-usual proceedings harm our friends, families, and communities. But now that Kanders is out, some prominent voices in the art world are whitewashing the significance of the victory, limiting the sense of possibility that has opened up.

Some have been eager to pick apart the history of the campaign, exceptionalizing the role of individual artists at the expense of collective organizing anchored outside the art system. This creates a false either-or division between artists and organizers, manufactures unnecessary drama, and misunderstands the reality of how the coalition against Kanders was nurtured and held together. Further, it implies that individual artists should be centered in any ensuing process at the museum — a position that we doubt many artists involved with the campaign would themselves advocate.

Others are rushing to ask: who is the next trustee to be targeted? Military contractors, prison profiteers, climate criminals, and more are pervasive on the board of the Whitney and other institutions. To be sure, we savor the fact that these violent oligarchs are now sleeping with one eye open, and we would welcome further action against them, but after Kanders’ departure, a focus on trustees alone could lead to a narrowly conceived focus on establishing guidelines of acceptability for trustee participation. This could easily become its own domain of unaccountable bureaucratic expertise if treated as an end in and of itself, with a closed-door committee adjudicating the boundary between “good” and “bad” money.

Still, others assert that the victory against Kanders demonstrates the need for enhanced diversity, inclusion, and representation on museum boards — as if the conflicts that came to a head with Kanders could be resolved primarily by demographic realignment. Among the lessons of the Kanders crisis has been the limitations of liberal versions of “identity politics.” Why would we imagine that anyone’s racial or ethnic background necessarily aligns that person with justice, or assume any unity between those who share a skin color? As the saying goes, “All my skin folk ain’t kinfolk.”

Our allies in the Bronx know this well. As [Shellyne Rodriguez](#) has shown, Black and Brown artists, nonprofit professionals, and elected officials are currently leveraging their identities and the traumatic history of that borough to facilitate the process of what they proudly call “self-gentrification.” It is necessary to break down the monolith of Blackness, or any other identity, which can always become a tool of oppression in its own right (case in point, [Kamala Harris](#)). This urgent need goes hand in hand with the task evoked by [Xaviera Simmons](#) in a recent article about the Whitney crisis: “Whiteness must undo itself to make way for a truly radical turn in contemporary culture.” Our work in mobilizing against Kanders and beyond has focused not on demographic diversity but on solidarity between struggles. Solidarity is not a box to be checked — it is difficult and painstaking work that requires us to ask: what debts do we owe to each other? What are we willing to sacrifice? How do we become political accomplices?

As we move forward, we take as our point of departure [the open letter](#) signed by 400 writers, scholars, and artists last May. There, it was proposed that the removal of Kanders could provide a pathway to a Decolonization Commission that would “include community stakeholders and guided by a variety of urgent principles: Indigenous land rights and restitution, reparations for enslavement and its legacies, the dismantling of patriarchy, workplace democracy, de-gentrification, climate justice, and sanctuary from border regimes and state violence generally.” We raised a similar prospect in previous actions taken against the [Brooklyn Museum](#) and the [American Museum of Natural History](#).

Now, following the removal of Kanders, the Whitney is especially primed for such a process. The road forward must substantially involve multiple stakeholders: museum workers, artists, intellectuals, and the collectives and community groups who are already enacting decolonization on the ground. We can imagine a wide range of participants in this process: [Indigenous Womxn’s Collective](#), [American Indian Community House](#), [No New Jails NYC](#), [Communities United for Police Reform \(CPR\)](#), [Chinatown Art Brigade](#), [Take Back the Bronx](#), [Brooklyn Anti-Gentrification Network](#), [Art Space Sanctuary](#), [Comite Boricua en la Diaspora](#), [Hydro Punk](#), [Mobile Print Power](#), [Queer Youth Power](#), and [Within Our Lifetime](#), to name just a few of the many important groups organizing in the city today. We cite some of them to exemplify the interconnectedness of struggles that characterize the project of decolonization.

Why decolonization? A [decolonial perspective](#) approaches our present political condition by beginning with the occupied land on which we stand. It acknowledges that the settler-colony of the United States was founded on the theft of land, life, and labor over 400 years, and that it operates as an external empire as well. The term insists that colonization is not a period sealed safely in the past, but an ongoing process inherent to the dynamics of contemporary [racial capitalism](#). It also, as a framework, necessitates abolition of prisons and police, borders and bosses, empires and oligarchs. What about museums?

Typically, decolonization has been understood by museum administrations to be limited to exhibition displays, programming, and how particular communities are represented. By targeting board membership and sponsorship, the Kanders campaign, alongside the important work of [Sackler PAIN](#), [BP or not BP?](#), and [Liberate Tate](#), have broken through the firewall between cultural representation and economic power. This is also the case with recent

campaigns to unionize museum workers, and Gulf Labor Artist Coalition's efforts to amplify the voices of those employed to construct museums. As the People's Cultural Plan and (De)Institutional Research Team have insisted, any discussion of funding structures, cultural policy, and institutional governance must also be connected to struggles around labor, land, and the development of alternative solidarity economies.

When we speak of a Decolonization Commission, we emphasize the word "process" because decolonization is not oriented to a singular endpoint known in advance, and nor is it about purity of method or intent. Our very willingness to engage the world of museums demonstrates this, particularly in light of the argument made by some that institutions like the Whitney may in the end be unsalvageable, that they are beyond repair and not worthy of our attention. We take this possibility seriously.

During the Kanders campaign, we sometimes heard the questions, "Aren't we better off having a compromised museum than none at all? What would we do without the Whitney?" But that "we" did not include those on the receiving end of Kanders' weapons — the detained and deported, the displaced and dispossessed, the dying and the dead. Seen from that angle, the Whitney was not a cherished cultural resource to be preserved at all costs (including tolerating figures like Kanders for their money) but an enabler of violence to be actively confronted.

In the coming year, much of our own energy will be devoted to establishing an autonomous movement space for art, education, and organizing. However, even as we develop our own initiative, we believe the museum can be made responsive to people rather than to the dictates of capital, that it can foster creativity and memory rather than functioning as a tool to launder the reputations of the ultra-wealthy. By participating in a decolonization process, the Whitney leadership could set an example for other institutions as they come under increasing scrutiny, paving the way for a process at a city-wide scale.

A space is needed to collectively assess the current situation, flesh out principles, and develop the parameters of a process. To that end, we call for a Town Hall Assembly in New York City on Saturday, September 7 at noon, with the location to be determined. The event will be both a celebration and a strategy session devoted to building on the momentum of the Kanders victory, at the Whitney and across all the cultural institutions of the city and beyond. All those who feel a stake in the future of our institutions and our movements are welcome. We are working to secure sign language interpretation, and the Town Hall Assembly will be live-streamed. For those interested in participating in the planning of this event or who cannot participate physically but wish to share their thoughts, email afterkanders@gmail.com.