

HYPERALLERGIC

150 Artists Amplify Demands for Reform at New Orleans Museum of Art

Ebony G. Patterson, William Powhida, and Xaviera Simmons have joined the call for art workers “to place strict conditions on their collaboration with NOMA,” which is being accused of bigotry and discrimination.

Hakim Bishara October 12, 2020



The New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) with Roy Lichtenstein’s “Five Brushstrokes” in 2015

In June, a group of former staff members at the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) accused the institution of enabling a “plantation-like

culture” in an open letter that described instances of surveillance and discrimination of Black and LGBTQ workers at the museum. Backed by hundreds of supporters, they launched the initiative #DismantleNOMA which calls on the museum to fundamentally reform its work environment and to immediately separate itself from its current leadership.

These demands are amplified in a new open letter released today, October 12, by a wide group of artists, art workers, and organizers from across the country. The letter, signed by more than 150 supporters to date, calls on NOMA to “take the first step toward restoring its relationship with the New Orleans community it claims to serve by immediately implementing the thirteen changes put forth by #DismantleNOMA.”

Symbolically released on Indigenous Peoples Day, federally recognized as Columbus Day, the open letter follows the opening of a new exhibition at NOMA this past weekend. When asked about the timing of the letter, its authors told Hyperallergic: “In the United States EVERYDAY holds the potential for resistance. Our interest in Indigenous Peoples Day extends only so far as its meaning encourages colonial institutions like NOMA to reflect on the persistent and ongoing nature of their settler violence.”

“Every day since this country’s inception we have seen violence enacted on Indigenous and Black people,” they continued. “We could have released this letter today, tomorrow or any day of the month. We stand firmly against white supremacy every day of the year.”

#DismantleNOMA has accused the museum administration of ignoring and perpetuating the use of racial slurs, wage discrimination against Black workers, violence by staff against Black visitors, and surveillance of targeted workers. The authors of the initial letter in June — Jennifer Williams; Dr. fari nzinga; Ifátùmínínú Bamgbàlà Arèsà (formerly known as Kelsi Brooks); Jonathan Serrette; and Jane Kate Wood — also decried the museum’s decision to permanently install a

recreation of a plantation parlor at a museum that serves a majority-Black population.

“How can NOMA claim to provide a public service when it harms the communities it purports to serve?” today’s open letter asks. The group calls on artists, curators, and arts workers “to place strict conditions on their collaboration with NOMA — to starve it of creative labor, time, energy, membership, admissions fees, etc., until all of #DismantleNOMA’s demands are met in full.”

The letter also encourages current curatorial staff, and funders like the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Ford Foundation, to publicly call on the museum for reform.

In a statement to Hyperallergic, NOMA said that it is “committed to being an anti-racist institution” and that it has outlined steps to honor that commitment in a “comprehensive Agenda for Change.”

“The Agenda for Change, readily accessible on our website and regularly updated with our progress, affirms our anti-racist commitments and details the work NOMA is doing in the areas of accountability, staff and equity, board development, programs and community, as well as collections, acquisitions and exhibitions,” the museum said. “All of these efforts reflect our dedication to serve our visitors, expand the offerings NOMA provides to the community in response to their requests and needs, and create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for our visitors, staff and artists.”

Guerrilla Girls, Ebony G. Patterson, William Powhida, Chloë Bass, Michael Rakowitz, and Xaviera Simmons are among the dozens of artists signed on today’s statement. The group continues to collect signatures to the open letter, which is reproduced in full below:

We are a group of artists and arts workers from across the United States, some of whom have exhibited or otherwise worked with the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA). We have penned this letter to express our resounding support for the demands put forth by former

NOMA employees Jennifer Williams, Dr. fari nzinga, Ifátùmínínú Bamgbàlà Arèsà (formerly known as Kelsi Brooks), Jonathan Serrette, and Jane Kate Wood, and for the broader initiative to #DismantleNOMA. We implore the museum to take the first step toward restoring its relationship with the New Orleans community it claims to serve by immediately implementing the thirteen changes put forth by #DismantleNOMA.

We do not expect to shame the museum into restructuring itself, since this is an institution that has long been shameless in its mistreatment of marginalized people. **Instead, we ask artists, curators, and arts workers, whose labor sustains this institution, to place strict conditions on their collaboration with NOMA—to starve it of creative labor, time, energy, membership, admissions fees, etc., until all of #DismantleNOMA’s demands are met in full.** We ask current curatorial staff at the museum to stand publicly in solidarity with #DismantleNOMA. We urge progressive funders, including the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Ford Foundation, to act in accord with their commitments to racial justice by honoring the demands of these former employees and community members.

We are dismayed, but not particularly surprised, by the virulently anti-Black, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic violence against NOMA employees enabled—and in some cases enacted—by current director Susan M. Taylor. The immediate removal of Susan M. Taylor is among #DismantleNOMA’s most urgent demands. The institution’s malfeasance also includes discriminatory hiring practices. Whereas museum leadership and management are overwhelmingly white, Black employees predominantly occupy lower and mid-level positions, contributing to a racialized wage gap within the museum and reinforcing economic disparities that exist across the city and region. The testimonies compiled by #DismantleNOMA further detail how anti-Blackness radiates out from the institution, impacting not only employees but the public as well. Black visitors have reportedly been subject to hostility by museum staff. In a city with a majority-Black

population, how can NOMA claim to provide a public service when it harms the communities it purports to serve?

The museum's response to #DismantleNOMA has been deeply disappointing. NOMA has created a page, titled "Agenda for Change," hidden under the "About" tab on its website, while the board of directors has largely remained silent as numerous former employees, interns, and community members speak out. NOMA continues to employ those identified by #DismantleNOMA as perpetuating the institution's racism, and remains an unsafe workplace for employees in almost every department. We echo #DismantleNOMA's call for an independent, third-party investigation into all harassment claims submitted during Susan M. Taylor's directorship.

The discriminatory violence endured by NOMA employees and visitors is a symptom of the racism of cultural institutions—insofar as they spearhead imperial knowledge production, facilitate gentrification and displacement, and, as Rhonda Lieberman wrote last year, enable "the worst of the moneyed elite ... to launder their reputations for plunder and pelf." NOMA is a particularly egregious example: founded by Isaac Delgado, whose wealth derives from a sugar plantation, the museum is now sustained by oil money and other harmful private funders. For instance, the Helis Foundation, which currently funds museum events and subsidizes free admission for teenagers, represents the philanthropic arm of the Helis Oil & Gas Energy Project. How much more of NOMA's funding derives from slavery, exploitation, and extractive industries?

We are galvanized by the many art worker organizing efforts currently underway, as well as by the ongoing movement to protect and uplift Black lives in response to over four hundred years of state-sanctioned anti-Black violence in the US. We understand the demands of #DismantleNOMA as part of a broader struggle against the ways in which arts institutions maintain white supremacy and racial capitalism. Artist Xaviera Simmons writes, "Whiteness must undo itself to make

way for the truly radical turn in contemporary culture”;
#DismantleNOMA provides an occasion for such an undoing to begin.

Signed,

Aaron Levy, Curator, Executive Director, Slought, Philadelphia
Abou Farman, artist, anthropologist, The New School, new york
Adina Glickstein, Arts worker, art critic, friend, Brooklyn, NY
Alejandro Eduarte, Community Member, Minneapolis
Alessandra Ametrano, Student, New York University, New York
Alexis Wilkinson, Curator, New York
Alvin Stampely III, Community member, Artist, Harlem, New York,
United States of America
Alyssa Lingerfelt, artist, Philadelphia, PA
amber carew, arts worker, i am born and raised in new orleans, los
angeles, ca
Amitis Motevalli, Artist, Los Angeles
Andreas Amble, Artist, Oslo
Andreas Petrossiants, Independent scholar, NYC
Andrew Weiner, academic/ally, New York University, NYC
André Magaña, Artist, Brooklyn, New York
Andy Davis, artist, Philadelphia, PA
Ánima Correa, Artist, Los Ángeles, CA
Art Handlers Alliance, arts worker advocates, New York, NY, USA
Asali DeVan Ecclesiastes, CEO, Ashé Cultural Arts Center, New
Orleans
Ashley Teamer, Artist, New Orleans, LA
Audrey Gair, Artist, Queens, NY
Audrey Ryan, Artist, Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT
Brett Wallace, Artist, Brooklyn, New York
Brooke Nicholas, Curator, New York City
C Maggio, arts worker, RIDGEWOOD
Catalina Ouyang, artist, New York
Chemu Ng’ok, Artist, Nairobi, Kenya
Chloë Bass, Artist, Brooklyn, NY

Christina Chan, Arts worker, New York, NY
Clare Gatto, Artist, Detroit, MI
Clarinda Mac Low, Artist, New York, NY
Clark Filio, Artist, Queens, NY
Coco Klockner, Artist/Writer, Brooklyn, NY
Cole Lu, artist, New York
Colleen Asper, Artist, Brooklyn, NY
Dan Herschlein, Artist, New York
Dana Kopel, Art worker, New York
Dana Powell, Artist, New York
Daniela Ortiz, Arts worker and activist, Perú
Ebony G Patterson, Artist, Chicago, IL
Edi Friedlander, Artist, New York
EJ Hill, Artist, Los Angeles
Elizaveta Shneyderman, curator & writer, queens, new york city
Elvia Wilk, Writer, editor, New York, NY
Emma Hedditch, Artist, NY
Erin Reid, art educator, Brooklyn, NY
Farah Salameh, Community Member, New Orleans Community
Fridges, New Orleans
Francesca Altamura, Curator, arts worker, organizer, Brooklyn, NY
Frank J. Stockton, Artist, Los Angeles, CA
Franklyn Cain, Artist, Brooklyn, NY
Gabe Gordon, Arts worker, teacher, friend, Brooklyn
gaby sahar, artist, London
Gavin Runzel, Curator, Brooklyn
Gee Wesley, Art worker, Red Hook, NY
Gerard Dalbon, Artist, Brooklyn
Gregory Kalliche, artist, New York, NY
Gregory Nachmanovitch, Artist, New York
Guerrilla Girls, Activist artists, Everywhere
hannah kaplan, artist and friend, brooklyn
Heather Davis, academic, arts worker, The New School, Brooklyn
Ian Epps, artist and activist, Brooklyn, NY USA
Ian Faden, Artist, Brooklyn, New York

Ilaria Conti, Curator, New York
Isabelle Brouman, Artist, Justice & Sustainability, New York City
Jackie Zdrojeski, Artist, Brooklyn, NY
Jake Sol Davidson, Artist, teacher, Yale University, Brooklyn
Jana Leo, artist and president of the Fundacion Mosis, modelos y sistemas, art and city, Madrid, Spain
Jared Friedman, Artist and Museum worker, New York City
Jarrett Martin Drake, Organizer, Student, & Teacher, Harvard University, Ithaca, NY
Jennean D Farmer, Artist, Educator, Brooklyn, NY
Jo Shane, Artist, New York
Joey Fillastre, artist, New Orleans
Johanne Swanson, arts worker, organizer, Brooklyn, NY
John Alleyne, Artist and Professor, Baton Rouge, LA
Jonathan Gonzalez, artist, Brooklyn
Jordan Strafer, artist, Brooklyn
Joseph Cuillier, Artist, The Black School, New York
Joseph Lubitz, Curator, New York
Jova Lynne, Artist and Curator, Detroit, MI
Julia Kwon, Artist, Washington, DC
Julia Mushalko, Museum Worker, Tenement Museum, New York NY
Julian Handler, Ally, Los Angeles
June Culp, Artist, Tokyo, Japan
Kaila Maurice, Student, Multidisciplinary Artist & Scientist, Xavier University of Louisiana, New Orleans, LA, USA
Kaitlyn Mar, Ally, New York
katie girtlian, Artist, arts worker, SAIC, Chicago, IL
Katie Grace McGowan, Artist, activist, arts administrator, Detroit, MI, USA
Ken Paranada, arts worker, Manila
Kerry Fitts, Artist, Gulf Coast
L. Kasimu Harris, Artist, New Orleans
Lincoln Tobier, Artist, Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles
Lizzy De Vita, Artist, Brooklyn, NY
Magdalena Moskalewicz, art historian and curator, School of the Art

Institute of Chicago, Chicago
Manolis D. Lemos, Artist, Athens, Greece
Mariana Sheppard, Artist, New Orleans
Mariana Valencia, Choreographer, New York City
Marquita Flowers, Human steeped in blackness, Bronx, NY
Mathew Kennedy, Academic & Ally, UTNO, New Orleans
Mauricio, Arts, Mexico
Megan Elevado, Writer, artist, arts worker, Brooklyn, NY
Melvin Rogers Stovall III, Martial Artist, Activist, New Orleans, LA, USA
Michael Pajón, Artist/ Art worker, New Orleans
Michael Rakowitz, Artist, Chicago
Michael Welsh, artist and arts worker, New York City
Mina Seck, Community member, New Orleans La
Miranda Samuels, Arts worker, organizer, grad student, New School for Social Research, New York
Monica R. Harris, Actor, Theatre Artist, Activist, New Orleans, LA, USA
Morgan Clark, Educator, community member, New Orleans, LA
Nathaniel Otting, Library Assistant, Museum of Modern Art, Sunnyside, NY
Nayland W Blake, Artist, Brooklyn, New York
Nik Richard, Artist, New Orleans, LA
Nikki Columbus, Writer & programmer, New York
Nora Landes, Art Worker, Brooklyn, NY
O.K. Fox, Activist, Art and Labor Podcast, New York
Paky Vlassopoulou, artist, Athens
Patrick Carlin Mohundro, artist, Brooklyn, NY USA
Patrick Jaojoco, Arts worker and cultural organizer; independent curator/writer, Arts Workers for Black Lives, Brooklyn
Paul John, Artist / Publisher / Educator, SVA; EFA; Endless Editions, NYC
Pedro Neves Marques, Artist, filmmaker, writer, Lisbon, Portugal
Peter P. Hopkins, Director, ArtHelix Gallery, New York City
Peter Rostovsky, Artist, writer, educator, Brooklyn

Rachel Vera Steinberg, curator, New York
Rania Lee Khalil, Artist, Brooklyn, New York
Rena Anakwe, artist & healer, Brooklyn, NY
Rin Kim Ni, artist, Brooklyn, New York
S W, Writer, NYC
Sanjana M Iyer, arts worker, Wendy's Subway & Printed Matter Inc.,
NYC
Sara Madandar, Artist, New Orleans, LA
Sara Ritsch, Ally, New Orleans
Sarah Ockuly, Artist and community member, New Orleans, LA
Sarah Wagner, artist, Detroit, MI USA
Sedrick Chisom, Artist, New York City
Shani Peters, Artist, The Black School, New York
Shruthi Venkata, College student, Harvard College, NYC
Sierra Vance, Scientist, friend, New Orleans, LA
Simon Wu, Writer, Brooklyn
Sindhu Thirumalaisamy, Artist, New York
Sophie FP, Artist, NYC
Stephanie Acosta, Artist, Brooklyn
Sydney Miranda, Friends, New Orleans, LA
Taehee Whang, artist, Hyperlink Press, Brooklyn, NY
Tania Yoshie kawakami, Per diem museum educator, NEW YORK
Tiffany Jaeyeon Shin, Artist, Brooklyn, NY
Tiril Hasselknippe, Artist, Stavanger, Norway
Vanessa Thill, Artist, Brooklyn, NY
Vijay Masharani, Artist, New York, NY
William Powhida, Artist, Queens, NY
William, community member, New Orleans
Xandra Ibarra, Independent Artist and Anti-Carceral Feminist
Organizer, Survived and Punished CA, Oakland, CA
Xaviera Simmons, Artist, arts worker, New York, New York
Zazu Swistel, Artist and Architect, Brooklyn, NY
Zoe Hopkins, Student, New York/Cambridge