

HYPERALLERGIC

News

Artist Says Queens Museum Repurposed Her Structure Without Permission

Xaviera Simmons's walled display structure, conceived for her solo show at the museum, was painted pink and used in another exhibition.

Elaine Velie - September 20, 2023



Xaviera Simmons, "Align" (2022), freestanding structure with wood, paint, and seven-channel video with sound (photo Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

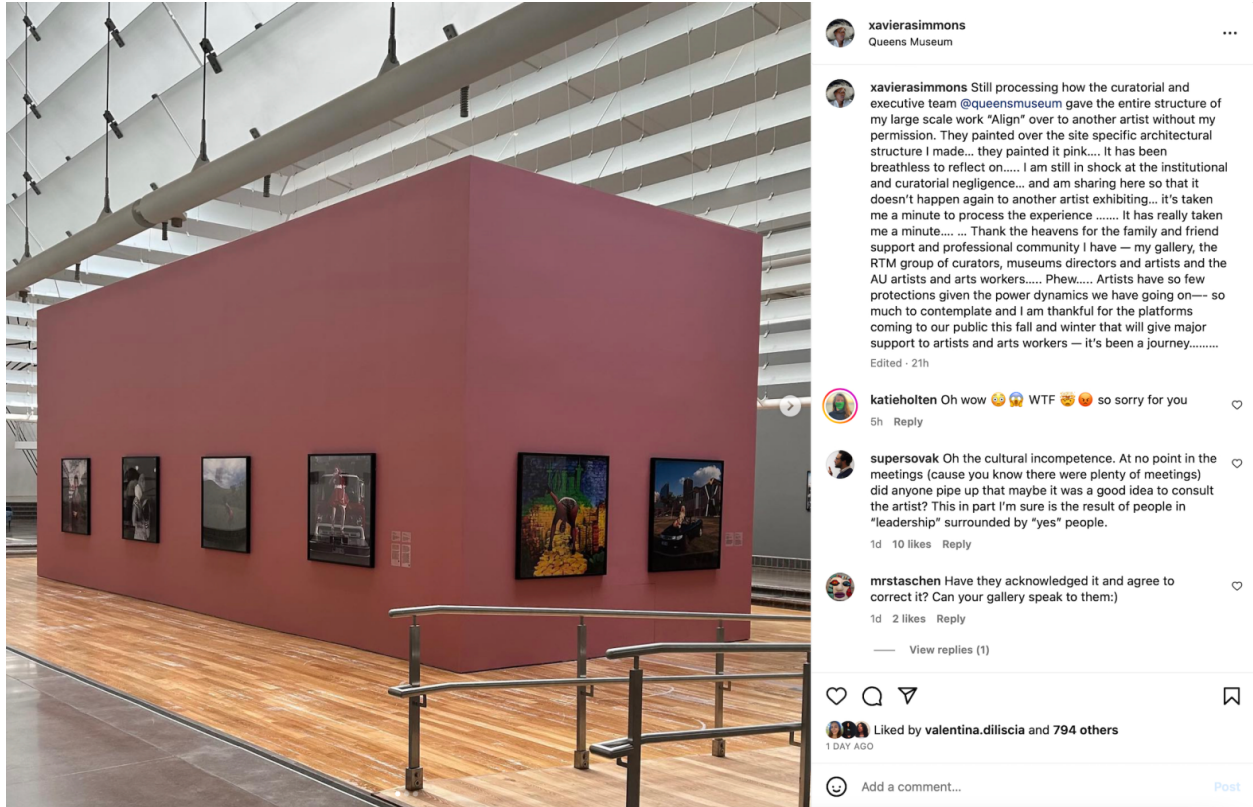
Artist Xaviera Simmons has called out New York's Queens Museum for repurposing part of her site-specific installation without her consent. The structure in question, conceived for her installation "Align," was the centerpiece of Simmons's solo exhibition *Crisis Makes a Book Club* at the institution this past winter.

"Align" comprised a large walled enclosure with an opening in one wall and a video series playing inside. On its exterior, the structure featured black wood panel siding onto which Simmons had written about the origin, nature, and continuity of whiteness. The museum removed the painted siding and returned it to Simmons along with the other contents of her exhibition after the show closed in March. The structure, however, stayed put.

"I conceived the work from beginning to end," Simmons told *Hyperallergic*, explaining that she had designed the enclosure specifically for the museum's large Central Atrium gallery space and had shaped her text panels to fit exactly. "I assumed that all of the pieces of the work were going to be shipped to my storage. All of it is my site-specific work."

On April 20, Simmons received an email, reviewed by *Hyperallergic*, informing her that the structure had been repurposed to showcase work in *Shooting Down Babylon*, a solo exhibition by artist Tracey Rose. *Hyperallergic* was unable to reach Rose for comment.

The email included photographs of Simmons's original structure, which had been painted pink, topped with a roof, and outfitted with a newly positioned opening. Rose's photographs hung from the exterior walls and a video work played inside.



Xaviera Simmons posted about the structure on Instagram. (screenshot Elaine Velie/*Hyperallergic*)

Simmons immediately notified the museum’s curatorial staff that she wanted her structure to be taken down. *Shooting Down Babylon* was slated to open to the public three days later, on April 23. On April 22, Simmons sent the first of two letters to the museum’s board of directors demanding that the institution dismantle her enclosure. Still, *Shooting Down Babylon* opened to the public on Sunday, April 23 with Simmons’s structure intact.

The museum was closed on Monday, April 24, and Tuesday, April 25, per its normal scheduled hours. A museum representative told *Hyperallergic* that beginning on Wednesday, April 26 — the second day that Rose’s show was open to the public — the institution placed a screen in front of Simmons’s structure to obscure it. The spokesperson said this feature was in place through April 30.

Simmons continued to demand that her work be removed and that she be sent photographs of it being taken down. On May 1, the museum closed its doors in order to dismantle the structure. Two days later, the institution emailed Simmons photos of the work being dismantled. The Queens Museum remained shuttered through May 10 in order to build a new pink enclosure in the same spot.

The Queens Museum spokesperson told *Hyperallergic* that the institution “did not foresee” Simmons’s disapproval of the structure’s repurposing and that its intentions were to re-use the piece in order to reduce waste. The representative emphasized that the museum complied with Simmons’s request when it became aware of her concerns.

“While it is common practice for museums to repurpose portions of an exhibit for future use, we temporarily closed the Museum to the public to remove the structure and built an entirely new one for the next show,” the spokesperson said. “We are committed to our mission and grateful to Xaviera for her bold and brilliant exhibition.”

Simmons, however, was caught off guard by the institution’s decision and failure to seek her authorization. “I have worked with museums for decades now,” Simmons said. “I have never had an issue with this. I have shown huge installations, I have shown works with site-specific, complicated installs.” In 2021, some artists walked away disillusioned with the Queens Museum after engaging in its Year of Uncertainty (YoU) residency program. Simmons served as a “co-thinker” for the program, a mentorship position.

Simmons also spoke to the relevance of the structure itself, explaining that she designed it to serve as a “space of pause” that was grand and overpowering while simultaneously offering a place for reflection and contemplation.

“No artist should be put in the position of an institution repurposing their art for another artist’s exhibition without their consent,” Simmons said. “A museum should not

be in the business of discrediting an artist's work then taking a long time when it comes to an artist asking for a work to come down."



The Queens Museum built a new structure for *Shooting Down Babylon*. (image courtesy Queens Museum)