

The Queens Museum Repurposed a Set of ‘Temporary Walls’ for Another Exhibition. Turns Out It Was a Sculpture by Xaviera Simmons

After the artist raised the alarm, the museum closed to remove and destroy what remained of the structure.

Sarah Cascone - September 21, 2023



Xaviera Simmons, *Align* (2022). Photo by Hai Zhang, courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery, Miami.

Last October, New York artist Xaviera Simmons opened her largest museum show to date, “Crisis Makes a Book Club,” at the Queens Museum. The exhibition’s central work was a site-specific structure titled *Align*, a large black architectural sculpture on which she had affixed panels hand painted with white text drawn from James Baldwin’s 1984 essay, “On Being White... and Other Lies,”

as well as her own thoughts on race. You could also step inside the structure and view seven of the artist's video works.

When the show closed in March, the museum decided to keep the underlying structure of *Align*, and opted to repurpose it—without consulting Simmons—for the next exhibition on the docket, “Tracey Rose: Shooting Down Babylon,” originally organized by the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town. Museum staff painted the structure pink, hung Rose's photographs on the exterior walls, and used the inner chamber as a small theater for a video work, after building a new entrance. Simmons was taken aback.

“I worked with the museum to build a site-specific work for the atrium that was large, expensive, and conceptualized completely by me,” Simmons told Artnet News. “It took a long time to conceptualize the feeling of an exterior that had one tone and interior that had another tone. I worked very hard to select the dimensions and materials, and the structure was built to my specifications. It is a sculpture just like any other work.”

Simmons said that when she received an email from the museum informing her the panels were being returned, she assumed the entire work was being sent back. “Until they sent me a photograph the day of the other opening, I did not know that they had taken the boards off and kept the structure,” she said.

“They sent me an email: ‘it’s a win win situation; it won’t go in the landfill’—but they never asked me my permission,” she added. “No artist is like, ‘no, sure, just reuse my work in the exact same configuration.’”

Simmons immediately expressed her objections, and asked that what remained of *Align* be dismantled and removed from the new exhibition. The museum agreed to do so, closing the Rose exhibition May 1 through 12 in order to demolish the structure and construct a replacement.

In an email to Artnet News, the museum confirmed this sequence of events. “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,” it said.

Simmons said that matters were made worse by being kept in the dark about what was happening with her work from the date she asked for it to be removed, April 20, until May 13 when the exhibition reopened. This was despite multiple inquiries to the institution's board, curators, and director.

"The registrar told me they had they had nothing to say about these 'temporary walls'—disrespectful," Simmons said. "If they were temporary walls, that would have been fabulous. Reuse away. But those were not temporary walls. That was a sculpture site specifically made for the show, built and fundraised for by the artist. The Queens Museum is gaslighting."

At the time, Simmons added, the Queens Museum asked her not to speak to the press about the incident. But she broke her silence on Instagram this week, posting images of her repurposed artwork as it originally appeared in Rose's exhibition, which remains on view through October 22.

"I am still in shock at the institutional and curatorial negligence... and am sharing here so that it doesn't happen again to another artist exhibiting," Simmons wrote. "It's taken me a minute to process the experience." She added that the museum has not shared photographs with her documenting the work's destruction.

She chose to share what happened to her as a reminder to other artists to be specific in their agreements with museums. "We have to look at our contracts and make amendments and changes to our contracts," she said. "We have to recognize we are small businesses, and we have to form solidarity with each other and support each other."