

“rules” of our Museum—mutual respect, fairness, tolerance and freedom of expression and, speaking personally, a commitment to kindness.

Here, the statement draws several inviolable lines that remind the staff to “stay in their lane”—a position they have already rejected, with their own “commitment to kindness” in the form of their call for a discussion of how these paradoxes can continue to coexist. The staff is positing: If we are a museum of contemporary art and culture, how can we not confront the contradictions present within our own structure? The museum’s director is responding that the structures are what they are, and that they should be willing to play by the rules.

Concurrent with what I am certain were days of deep concern and discussion by all segments of the museum’s staff, leadership, and board, the situation was about to get even more complicated. Beginning in late November 2018, Decolonize This Place (DTP), a collective of artists and activists, began building a campaign, in their words, in solidarity with the staff of the museum. The campaign began with a variety of public statements, and an initial protest, followed by a town hall meeting of about 200 people, including some Whitney staff. A set of weekly actions was then planned for the nine weeks preceding the public opening of the 2019 Whitney Biennial on May 19. Each Friday evening from March 22 through May 17, during free public admission to the museum, DTP, along with a host of collaborators, brought protestors to the Whitney’s lobby. For the fourth week of continuous action, DTP and various coalitions planned a potluck, in which they offered pizza and dumplings to both protestors and museum staff alike, a milder symbolic action aimed at lightening the staff’s burden. Each week they drew connections between the funding of the museum, its board, and the anti-racist, pro-Indigenous, pro-Palestinian, wage equity, and de-gentrification work with which the artist-activist collective is engaged. The lobby of the museum

was often filled with protestors bearing banners and chanting. Sometimes unaffiliated publics joined in; others took it all in, and then moved on to see the works in the galleries. It is commendable that the Whitney did not choose to evict the protestors from the lobby, or from its galleries during the Schutz protests, but it is also clear that doing so would have brought more negative attention to the situation rather than less.

→ Alongside this campaign, a more subtle action was launched: artist-activists surreptitiously replaced the general “About the Whitney” brochure available at the museum with a look-alike pamphlet exactly replicating the house style. This four-by-eleven-inch brochure, however, did not offer highlights of the collection, or history of the museum. Rather, it detailed the origins of the controversy in a straightforward and compelling style, opening with the bold, all-caps text “WELCOME TO THE CRISIS AT THE WHITNEY,” accompanied by the following:

Infuriating, outrageous, immoral, unethical. Warren B. Kanders, vice chair of the Whitney Board of Trustees has become the focus of protests after reports emerged that his company, The Safariland Group, manufactures the tear gas used against asylum seekers at the Tijuana border. We were horrified to learn that it has also been used at Standing Rock, in Ferguson, and in Gaza.

We invite you to learn why nearly 100 Whitney museum staff members wrote a letter calling for the consideration of Kanders’ resignation, new ethical and moral guidelines for trustee participation, and a museum-wide forum to address staff concerns.<sup>5</sup>

While the imposter was noticed shortly after it was distributed, I admire the meticulous care taken by its creators, not only in replicating the size and style of the original brochure, but also in repurposing the original formatting to convey the complex

reasons for the protests. Interestingly, it also adopted the Socratic pedagogies often used within museum spaces to elicit engagement from publics by asking questions like “Why Kanders?,” “Why Labor?,” and “Why Museums?”

The imposter brochure conveys a great deal of information, ranging from the rationale of protestors and the business involvements of trustees beyond Kanders, to labor and land issues. The project was conceived of and executed by the (De)Institutional Research Team—(D)IRT—a collective of artists, academics, activists, and cultural workers. One aspect of the brochure that is particularly compelling is its clarity: in no uncertain terms, it lays out the specific issues protestors have with Kanders, including his relationship to state violence and reputational whitewashing via Whitney board membership. It also connects these issues with labor inequity within the museum, both for staff and artists, as well as the letter written by staff to museum leadership:

These relationships reveal many layers of complicity between artists, institutions, corporations, and wealthy individuals, and can often be uncomfortable to discuss.

But this is what happens when we hold each other accountable. We recognize that museums are also sites of struggle and serve to legitimize certain cultural forms and the voices of select artists, along with the reputations and credibility of patrons like Kanders, even when their values and actions may be in direct opposition. This tension is one of the central reasons why art washing poses such a problem for the role of art and the artist at the Whitney.<sup>6</sup>

Importantly, the group brings up the problem of “singling out” one particular board member, when others are perhaps also problematically connected to profits from unsavory involvement in the military industrial complex, not to mention real estate, financial institutions, and other industries widely represented on museum boards that rely on inequity to make extraordinary

sums of money. In fact, this has been the critique leveled at most of the anti-Kanders protests: If a purity test is applied for board membership, how on earth will enough funds be raised to support cultural spaces? (More on this soon.)

(D)IRT’s low-key guerrilla act, the other side of the DTP protest coin, offered the Whitney’s publics as well as its staff ways to understand the confrontations happening around them, albeit briefly.

Meanwhile, months earlier, the Whitney was gearing up to announce the list of artists to be included in the 2019 Biennial, curated by Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta. Just before the list of participating artists was released to the *New York Times*, artist Michael Rakowitz was talking to curators of the exhibition about his decision to withdraw from the show.<sup>7</sup> It was not his wish that his withdrawal be made public, never mind the basis of the eventual *New York Times* headline about the show announcing the other seventy-five participants; as he told me later, his withdrawal was based on the politics of the museum, rather than the exhibition itself. Via the subsequent publicity around his choice, he was called out, in my opinion unfairly, for using his privilege as a more established artist to make a statement; other, less established artists, his critics argued, needed the boost that inclusion in the biennial would give their careers. Beyond the fact that Rakowitz did not seek publicity for his decision, it seemed to me that observers felt Rakowitz expected others to follow him—which was not the case. I think Rakowitz used his power in an important way, and faced questions parallel to those I was sometimes asked after I left the Queens Museum, in particular, whether I was disappointed that staff didn’t resign in protest. I defended their need and/or desire to remain, as I knew that my privilege, particularly that of being married to someone who had a job with health insurance, made me less vulnerable than some of my colleagues.

It is worth noting that at the opening of the 2019 Biennial, artists Nicole Eisenman and Mel Chin (only Eisenman’s work