

The New York Times

Decolonizing the Art Museum: The Next Wave

By Olga Viso

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May 1, 2018



Sam Durant's "Scaffold" at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis was removed shortly after its installation in 2017. Credit Anthony Soufflé/Zuma Press

Museums have long considered themselves above the fray of the political. But the past 18 months have brought unexpected challenges, and leaders across the country are being confronted with an urgent question: How do museums reconceive their missions at a time of great societal reckoning around race and gender, and as more diverse audiences demand a voice and a sense of accountability?

As director of the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis, I faced this challenge in 2017 after a controversy over the placement of a public sculpture, "Scaffold," by Sam Durant. The work, first exhibited in Europe in 2012, depicted gallows that represented seven state-sanctioned executions between 1859 and 2006. It was intended to critique the persistence of the death penalty in our democracy.

Yet part of the work that recalled a particular event in Minnesota history was seen by indigenous local communities as a painful trauma trigger: the re-creation of the 1862 scaffold used to put to death 38 Dakota-Sioux men in the largest mass execution in American history.

Protesters demanded the work's destruction as threats of violence mounted on that Memorial Day weekend. In a surprising outcome, the artist offered to dismantle the sculpture and give the intellectual property rights to the Dakota. The willingness of all parties — artist, Dakota elders, Minneapolis city officials and the Walker's staff and board leaders — to engage in productive mediation would not have been possible if the old hierarchies that placed a museum's authority above its public's feelings had been in charge.

It is not easy to acknowledge one's blind spots. What I had hoped would be an opportunity for public education and "truth to power" in the presentation of "Scaffold" was simply not possible because of the continuing historical trauma about an unreckoned-with colonial past. This was a humbling public admission for a person whose career has been devoted to providing a platform for underrepresented histories.

While I am no longer a museum director, I believe that museums must embrace this form of dialogue if they are to remain relevant. To do so requires radically different models of leadership than we've had until now. Yet it is hard to resist entrenchment, and difficult to take a risk. It is even more difficult to fail. But I believe that proceeding with empathy and humility are worth everything.

We have been here before. In the 1980s, during the Reagan presidency and the AIDS crisis, culture wars over artistic censorship raged. I was coming of age as a Cuban-American in an era of institutional critique. In my first curatorial jobs, I fought along with others to present art that exposed the underlying power structures of white establishment culture, corporate America and the federal government. But these efforts failed to effect lasting change.

Thirty years later, we are fighting the same cultural battles, and the curators who emerged then are today's besieged leaders. Despite best efforts to make meaningful change, exponential gaps remain between the growing minority-majority American population and those who lead, support, attend or are employed by art museums. Wealth disparity and the shifting values and expectations of the next generation of museum donors are also factors.

The surging commercial art market has become another colonizing force, even as it has opened new economies for artists of color. There are now two incompatible art worlds: one committed to inclusion, artistic freedom and change, the other driven by money and entitlements. When agendas collide, there are casualties. Major museums with recent leadership turnovers, apart from the Walker, include the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and the Queens Museum in New York, where directors and curators (all of them women) have stepped down.

Breakthrough actions are required in this era of reckoning and accountability. Susan Goldberg, National Geographic's first female editor in chief, set a courageous example. For her April 2018 issue, she commissioned an outside assessment of the magazine's treatment of race throughout its history. She discovered that until 1970, it "did little to push its readers beyond the stereotypes ingrained in white American culture." Rather than minimize her institution's history, Ms. Goldberg addressed it.

The exhibition "Americans," developed by the noted Comanche curator Paul Chaat-Smith at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, confronts the racism inherent in

the celebration of Thanksgiving and the naming of certain sports teams. It does so in the nation's capital with directness, honesty and humor. Its success points to the recognition — by major, predominantly white-run institutions like the Smithsonian — of the need to elevate alternative perspectives that disrupt mainstream understanding.

Individual artists have also taken bold steps to challenge institutional status quo. When Mark Grotjahn relinquished a prestigious artist award and acknowledged that the prize had been bestowed upon too many white male artists before him, many were startled. Sam Durant's concession of the intellectual property rights to the Dakota people also demonstrated an unprecedented willingness to listen and seek earnest reconciliation.

Systemic change takes time, vision and nuanced leadership at every level, most especially among donors and museum boards. Selfless investment and fortitude are required. So is a willingness to endure discomfort. To move forward, the entire ecosystem must devote itself to a longer game.

Art can illuminate the fissures in society and in return offer opportunities for healing. But should artists be the only ones to bear the brunt of this responsibility? If museums want to continue to have a place, they must stop seeing activists as antagonists. They must position themselves as learning communities, not impenetrable centers of self-validating authority.

If they do not, museums run the risk of becoming culturally irrelevant artifacts. Now is the time to be open to radical change. The next wave of decolonizing America's art museums must succeed, because to lose our capacity for empathy in a democracy is not an option.

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