What Warren Kanders's Defeat at the Whitney Teaches Us About How Protest Works Now

We have entered a new era of art and protest. How did it happen?

Ben Davis, July 26, 2019

Activists took over the lobby at the Whitney Museum of American Art to protest and demand the removal of the museum's board of directors Vice Chairman Warren B. Kanders. Photo by Erik McGregor/Pacific Press/LightRocket via Getty Images.

In the pantheon of texts about art, there are very, very few that have had the impact of "The Tear Gas Biennial." Published online by *Artforum* last Thursday, it amounted to a powerfully argued renewed call to artists in the Whitney Biennial to boycott the show over the museum's inaction on removing Warren Kanders, its weapons-manufacturer trustee, from its board. It almost immediately triggered actual and dramatic material consequences.

With months having gone by since the notion of an artist boycott had been first articulated, the push for one was moribund. But by the day after the publication of the essay, a first wave of artists had declared they wanted out of

the show; over the weekend, a second wave followed. This Thursday morning, exactly one week after the text was published, Warren Kanders resigned.

The effects are historic. They open up a new epoch for museums, with effects likely to stalk every institution and every large-scale art event going forward. It is hard to say where its ramifications will end, but it's certain that the expulsion of Kanders will be what this particular biennial is remembered for.

The groundwork for this startling turn of events had been prepared by many weeks of protest and debates, both by artists within the show and protesters outside the museum. These have rendered the terrain combustible enough that this particular match could land and have its explosive effect. That's worth remembering.

Nevertheless, despite all the activism around this show, it was *this* text and not the previous calls or protests that had the effect of changing the game. When people scrutinize this moment as an era-defining case study, it will be worth assessing: What was it about this intervention that enabled it to so dramatically achieve its aims?

Protesters at the Whitney Museum. Photo: Brian Boucher.

The Focus

Decolonize's pitch to the public was very clear that the protests against Kanders were the jumping off point for a total transformation of the museum. This process would cleanse the board of "Kanders and others like him" and open a path "to begin imagining together what more fundamental rearrangements of power, privilege, and resources might entail, starting with the very site of the museum itself." The demand for a "decolonization commission" has now been reiterated by the group in the wake of his ouster.

It seems to me that "The Tear Gas Biennial" is argued in the opposite way. It mentions the argument that "all money is evil"—but as a form of preterition, acknowledging the point only to zero in again on the need to protest Kanders specifically. The rhetorical work it does is focused like a laser on establishing that the choice of target is not "arbitrary," but actually "exceptional."

It is of course possible, and even likely, that this was simply a tactical rhetorical gambit. In the end, Kanders's unprecedented and now likely precedent-setting resignation opens up much bigger questions. Paradoxically, it was bracketing out those larger questions that seems to have made this call to protest particularly persuasive. "We know that this society is riven by inequities and brutal paradoxes," the authors of "The Tear Gas Biennial" wrote. "Faced with this specific profiteer of state violence, we also find ourselves in a place to act."

Even as activists now ask the question of who to target next and how to generalize a movement, it is worth saying that the focused approach cut through the sense that this is an impractically and paralyzingly total conversation. It really looks as if it allowed the eight artists who suddenly withdrew from the show in its wake to frame their cause as the principled rejection of a particular donor rather than a push to topple the museum system in general.

It also, the *New York Times*'s report on the resignation strongly suggests, drove a wedge between Kanders and his fellow trustees: "Some felt Mr. Kanders should quit for the good of the museum; others worried that his doing so would embolden protesters to demand the resignation of other board members, including some who have also had business interests in industries

that have been targeted by activists, like oil and gas companies and defense contractors.”

Protest at the Whitney during the museum’s Andy Warhol show. Photo: Ben Davis.

The Authors

The particular authors of “The Tear Gas Biennial” were uniquely positioned to make this particular argument land with force.

For one, two of the authors were able to claim that they had “recently rejected offers from the Whitney in explicit protest against Kanders.” (It does not say which two or what the nature of the offer was, only that they were “private negotiations, private gestures” that they were making public to show bona fides in their call for collective action.) That stake prevented the text from being dismissed easily as moral grandstanding by onlookers (though there was plenty of dismissal anyway).

Worth mentioning too, given the degree to which questions of inclusivity centered this biennial, is that the call came from a trio of black intellectuals embedded in the debates over art and politics. Tobi Haslett and Ciarán Finlayson are important writers and thinkers in their own rights, but the presence of Hannah Black as an author has particular symbolic significance.

Two years ago, the Whitney Biennial was defined by the debate over Dana Schutz's *Open Casket*. Black's open letter demanding that the work be destroyed because of the offense it caused as an example of a white artist coopting black pain touched off a bitterly divisive conversation around cultural appropriation that made the Biennial a topic-on-*The-View*-level cultural flashpoint.

(Incidentally, that 2017 Biennial had also offered the opportunity for a conversation about patronage, albeit a more intramural one, in the form of Occupy Museum's *Debtfair*, an installation connecting the business of MoMA trustee Larry Fink to the rise of student debt, correlating art patronage with predatory finance. The discussion around that work, which included at least an attempt at an in-museum rally, was essentially wiped from the historical record by the furor over *Open Casket*.)

Debate about who is represented and who gets to speak within art had already been escalating in 2017. The *Open Casket* controversy turbo-charged that discussion. In its wake, the art industry shivered and tried to translate all that energy into affirmative terms that it could work with. Uniting activists and administrators, the idea of redressing historical imbalances of representation within the museum became a very, very powerful force, maybe *the* central force in art discourse in the last two years—for good in my opinion, though clearly it can shade into acritical celebration.

We should not miss the point that the present abrupt turn of events triggered by the *Artforum* text was so razor-sharp at least in part because it represented a dramatic break from this previous consensus discourse.

Even Decolonize, with its uncompromising position, dropped its original call for artists to boycott after participants in the show objected that such a move amounted to silencing artists of color and placing an undue burden on them (objections alluded to in "The Tear Gas Biennial"). In fact, after a backlash over an initial round of reviews that called the Biennial "safe," Decolonize added to their protest a statement making the case for artists staying in quite clear: "Your presence is monumental, and you are sculpting the future of the arts landscape." Instead, it denounced critics of the show—encompassing, for instance, the *Times*'s Holland Cotter, whose review was quite clearly sympathetic to the anti-Kanders campaign—as agents of white

supremacy trying “to separate us from each other in the name of art and protest.”

I am not saying there is nothing to debate about the language used by critics in reviewing the show, the vast majority of whom were white men (including, of course, myself). But I would point out that there is a stark divide between this way of framing things and the argument in “The Tear Gas Biennial” that proved so decisive.

In fact, Black, Haslett, and Finlayson cast a jaundiced eye on artists in the 2019 Biennial who were “outraged when the ‘radicality’ of their work was questioned in reviews.” In calling for a boycott, “The Tear Gas Biennial” spoke dismissively of the way that “the art world imagines itself as a limited sphere of intellectual and aesthetic inquiry, where what matters, first and foremost, are inclusion, representation, and discussion.”

Again, the unique impact of this text is possible, in part, because of the unique status of the authors: Within the framework of the current art discourse, perhaps *only* critics of color speaking in a united voice, rooted in political critique, and including one author who previously helped impel the intensified moral focus on representation in the first place, could have the rhetorical authority to question how the discourse of representation was being valued here.

The History

“The Tear Gas Biennial” was, finally, very effective in its mobilization of actual historical templates for action, rendering tangible a demand that had perhaps previously seemed abstract. I do, however, have some questions about that history.

To take the example I know best, Robert Morris’s closure of his Whitney show in May 1970 as a gesture of solidarity with student walkouts and wildcat strikes that were sweeping the country is cited in “The Tear Gas Biennial” as an inspiring precedent. According to Julia Bryan-Wilson’s *Art Workers*, Morris’s action helped touch off the New York Art Strike Against Racism, War, and Repression, involving pickets of museums with hundreds of artists—an inspiring high point of artistic solidarity with social causes (albeit, according to the *Times* at the time, a very polite one).

Importantly, that formation was stalked by all the same kinds of internal debates that stalk the present. "Many anti-war artists were against what seemed to be the silencing of their own medium of communication," Elizabeth Baker wrote in *Artnews.* "Some were having shows which they did not care to shut down. Others resented injudiciously applied pressures."

Despite the impetus of the historic wave of mass protest sweeping across US society at the time, the Art Strike splintered stunningly fast, riven by debates about privilege and efficacy. "Feelings among the Strike activists range from suspicion to disgust," Baker wrote in her September 1970 postmortem, only a little more than three months after the May high point. "The protest, if not destroyed, is dormant. What happened?"

Have we moved beyond the limits represented by that history? To a great extent, the Kanders expulsion blows through anything I would have thought possible based on history—which means, in part, that all precedent fails in terms of assessing where its impact will end, what precedents it opens up, what crises it will engender.

Looking at the campaign, what still strikes me is how momentous its effects are versus how fragmented its actual contours were. Decolonize waged a dogged series of protests, but the effective blow came out of the blue from another source, from three intellectuals articulating matters in their own terms, triggering artists to act very abruptly in small groups, detonating the final crisis.

Kanders's resignation is an immense symbolic victory, rendering the life of a war profiteer that much more unpleasant and unacceptable in the public square. But it remains, in broader terms, a victory mainly of symbolism: It does not hurt his company's bottom line. Meanwhile, for artists, it opens up structural questions that will cut across the entire system of arts and culture, throwing out immense centrifugal pressure, opening up all kinds of tensions that run between and through institutions and anybody connected to them. The potential for this to radicalize the conservative side while diffusing and splintering the efforts of the radical side has to be stated, particularly given the debates about focus and who gets to speak that linger, I think, basically unresolved beneath the surface of the celebration.

Right now the meaning is up for grabs. Who gets to say whether the unleashed energy goes into carrying on at the Whitney and intensifying demands, or

moves on to another particularly unsavory donor elsewhere, or actually uses the publicity of art to amplify solidarity with organizations working on immigrant struggles and victims of state violence outside the art world? We have entered a new historical period for artists and museums. It is not clear yet where it leads.