

WEEK THREE:

WHITNEY, WE REPEAT:

STANDING ROCK

TIJUANA

NEW YORK CITY

FERGUSON

PALESTINE

U.S. PRISONS

BALTIMORE

OAKLAND

PUERTO RICO

+ + +

**WARREN B. KANDERS
MUST GO, PERIOD.**

#decolonizethisplace



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Kanders Must Go: An Open Letter from Theorists, Critics, and Scholars

We, the undersigned theorists, critics, and scholars, are writing to address the unfolding crisis at the Whitney Museum, and to call for the removal of Warren B. Kanders, the vice-chairman of the museum's board. In making this call, we are amplifying a demand put forth by 100 members of the Whitney staff in a letter to the museum administration in November, 2018. Kanders is the CEO of Safariland, a "law enforcement products company" responsible for the manufacturing and marketing of weapons such as the tear gas used against migrant families at the U.S./Mexico border, Water Protectors at Standing Rock, protestors in Ferguson, Oakland, Palestine, Puerto Rico, Egypt, and more. The NYPD and Corrections Departments across the country are also among Safariland's major clients. We stand with those members of the staff who organized and spoke out at great risk to themselves, and the dozens of grassroots groups that have been taking action at the Whitney Museum in the period since the staff letter was released.

The stakes of the demand to remove Kanders are high and extend far beyond the art world. Alongside universities, cultural institutions like the Whitney are among the few spaces in public life today that claim to be devoted to ideals of education, creativity, and dissent beyond the dictates of the market. Yet, these institutions have been historically entwined with the power structures of settler colonialism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism. They have long functioned as "good places to convert roughly obtained private wealth into social prestige," as the Washington Post recently put it. These institutions provide cover for the likes of Kanders as they profit from war, state violence, displacement, land theft, mass incarceration, and climate disaster. Upon learning about Kanders's connection to Safariland, the authors of the staff letter wrote, "we felt not annoyed, not intellectually upset—we felt sick to our stomachs, we shed tears, we felt unsafe . . . For many of us, the communities at the border, in Ferguson, in the Dakotas, are our communities."

The demand to remove Kanders points to broader patterns of toxic philanthropy on museum boards, universities, and other public and private institutions. Protests are currently proliferating around museums, from P.A.I.N. Sackler's recent success in forcing the Guggenheim and the Tate to cut ties with the Sackler family, to ongoing campaigns targeting El Museo Del Barrio, MoMA, the American Museum of Natural History, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Brown University Arts Initiative where Kanders is also a donor and board member. These calls to hold institutions accountable, and to deeply transform them, have a long historical lineage, including the work of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition and the Art Workers Coalition in the New York during the 1960s.

The Whitney and institutions like it are sites of struggle, bringing multiple stakeholders together in acts of solidarity. These new formations, in turn, flow into broader movements for freedom and justice. The demand to remove Kanders issued in the staff letter, and the subsequent mobilization by dozens of community groups for the ongoing 9 weeks of art and action, suggest that the tides are turning. Saying "no" to Kanders opens a positive opportunity to begin a deep, and long-overdue conversation about **artwashing**, the role of private funding in the cultural sphere, and the accountability of institutions to the communities they claim to serve.

The Whitney staff letter has called for "the development and distribution of a clear policy around Trustee participation," that would "clarify what qualifies or disqualifies a wealthy philanthropic individual for the Board. Is there a moral line?" Clarifying lines of unacceptability concerning Trustee participation is an crucial step by the museum, but on its own this reform will not resolve the crisis at the Whitney, or at other institutions facing similar dilemmas. At stake are deeper structural questions related to the distribution of power and the shape of institutional governance. These questions have been addressed in recent years by a range of grassroots groups and student movements working to "decolonize" museums and universities. **They are building solidarity across struggles by demanding decolonization commissions that include community stakeholders, and that are guided by a variety of urgent principles: Indigenous land rights and restitution, reparations for enslavement and its legacies, the dismantling of patriarchy, workplace democracy, de-gentrification, climate justice, and sanctuary from border regimes and state violence more generally.**

There are no easy solutions to the current crisis of the Whitney, and there is no blueprint for decolonization. But there is a desire to confront these problems across a broad spectrum of the arts, academia, and grassroots community groups. As mobilizations and actions continue, we call upon educators and cultural workers of all kinds to join us in taking a stand against Kanders, including artists in the Whitney Biennial and in the collection of the museum. **This moment is an opportunity for the museum leadership to do the right thing, to stand on the right side of history, and to participate a transformative process that could set the bar for other institutions across the country.**