



THE CRISIS OF THE WHITNEY IS JUST THE BEGINNING: J26 TOWN HALL ASSEMBLY

Hosted by Decolonize This Place, in Collaboration with Chinatown Art Brigade and W.A.G.E.

AGENDA:

1:00-2:30

Land Acknowledgement
Introduction, Context and Framing by Facilitation Team
Open Town Hall: each participant will be allotted 2-3 minutes

2:45-3:30

Organizing and Action Break-Out Groups facilitated by Hosts and core collaborators

3:30-4:00

Groups reconvene and report back to assembly
Summary of Next steps

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This place is, and always has been, a place of multiple Indigenous movements. Our gathering today, at its most fundamental level, stands in solidarity with the Lenape peoples, past, present, and future—and their continuing presence in the homeland and throughout the Lenape diaspora. We stand in solidarity with all Indigenous peoples, here and beyond, whose land was stolen to create settler states, and who continue to live under siege, surveillance, and colonial structural violence on their own occupied lands and waters. And we stand with all those advancing Indigenous resurgence and decolonization in the face of colonial oppression. We are here in support of the return of their lands.

This acknowledgement should not function as acceptance or closure, but as a call to commit, to work to reconfigure our notions about ourselves, our received notions of freedom and obligation, as we come to understand that we operate in a space, and in ideologies, founded on exclusions and attempted erasures of many Indigenous peoples, including those on whose land this institution is located. This is a call to work, to take on the responsibility of dismantling the ongoing effects of our settler colonial situation. This is where, together, we must begin and persist.

BACKGROUND: The current crisis of the Whitney was sparked by the courageous decision of Whitney staffers last month in an open public letter to demand, among other things, the removal of Safariland CEO Warren Kanders from the board of the museum. Kanders is the CEO of Safariland, a corporation that manufactures “law enforcement products,” including the tear gas used against migrant families presently at the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as demonstrators in Ferguson, Standing Rock, Oakland, Egypt, Palestine, and beyond. Many of us, our families, and our communities here and abroad have been on the receiving end of the products made and marketed by Safariland. Safariland maps in negative relief the connections between our ungovernable uprisings against white supremacy, settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, state repression, and the violence of capital itself. When museum director Adam Weinberg drew a line in the sand by standing against his own staff, there was a surprising lack of public outcry from artists, critics, curators, and other stakeholders. Decolonize This Place and affiliated groups took direct action at the museum on December 9th, followed in turn by a range of autonomous interventions amplifying the overall message that Kanders must go.

INTENTION: The purpose of this Town Hall Assembly is to collectively discuss next steps in solidarity with the demands addressed by the staff, some of whom have anonymously testified to an atmosphere of intimidation at the museum since the release of the letter. A diversity of tactics are already on the table for the coming months in advance of the opening of 2019 Whitney Biennial on May 17th, including the invitation extended by W.A.G.E. for biennial participants to withhold their participation in solidarity with the staff while simultaneously demanding compensation for their dissent and refusal (see below). The months leading up to the Biennial provide a horizon for action in the most expanded sense, one that points beyond any single figure like Kanders. Removing Kanders is not an end in of itself, and he is just the tip of the iceberg. At stake are essential questions about the political economy of artwashing, the accountability of the museum to its workers and publics, and the complicity of the institutions such as the Whitney with forces of death, disaster, displacement and dispossession. At the same time, issues of governance, funding, working conditions, pay, and the right to organize have all been brought into the open with this crisis.

MOVEMENT: The current crisis of the institution is an opportunity to reclaim, reimagine, radically transform our cultural institutions. The J26 Town Hall Assembly is one step in building power together in a movement-building process that far exceeds the Whitney Museum. It is a movement that practices patience while being action-oriented; it organizes from below and to the left, as the Zapatistas have taught us. Walking we ask questions, and when we breathe, we breathe together.

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

- We respect the voices, needs, time, and boundaries of each other, the facilitators of the space, and the staff of Cooper Union. We also respect everyone’s names, preferred gender pronouns, and expressed identities.
- We speak only for ourselves, and commit to hearing each other and creating opportunities for all voices to be heard, especially those that have been historically marginalized or silenced.
- We attempt to step up and step back, meaning we take note of who is participating and who is not. If you tend to participate often, consider “stepping back” and vice versa. Don’t take up too much space. “White dudes in particular take note”
- We make no assumptions about someone’s race, gender, age or class identity based on their appearance. We also understand that no one is required to share information about their identities.
- We recognize that certain behavior—such as shouting someone down in a meeting or trivializing oppression—can be triggering for those who have been on the receiving end of different and multiple forms of oppression.
- We commit to ongoing awareness of our prejudices, the structures of oppression that affect our personal experiences, and our privileges (by virtue of being white, male, cis-gendered, able-bodied, a U.S. citizen, wealthy, and/or straight, among other identities) in this society.
- We accept a shared responsibility in holding one another accountable to these agreements.

“We insist that kanders is but a symptom of a fundamental structural crisis for the art system, and that the removal of kanders and the other demands of the staff must be understood as but one step in a broader process of decolonization.”

INVITATION TO ARTISTS PARTICIPATING IN THE 2019 WHITNEY BIENNIAL FROM W.A.G.E.

In a few months, more than 70 artists will be contracted by the Whitney Museum of American Art to supply the content for its 2019 Biennial exhibition. In the capacity of temporary workers, these artists will be permitted, and even encouraged, to publicly dissent, openly question, and politically engage with visitors through their participation. If you are one of these artists, W.A.G.E. invites you to use your exceptional status as a worker who can claim both the freedom to dissent and the right to be paid to withhold your labor in solidarity with Whitney staff who cannot. We invite you to put your exceptionality to work.

We make this invitation to amplify demands made by group of full-time employees and part-time contracted workers at the Whitney Museum who composed an internal letter to Director Adam D. Weinberg decrying the museum’s silence on Warren Kanders as complicity and pointed to an abdication of responsibility that would fall, in the form of increased labor and decreased political agency, on those already impacted most directly by state violence, oppression and exploitation: the museum’s visitor-facing staff. The task of explaining on behalf of silent leadership why Warren Kanders remained on the museum’s board would be assigned to the lowest paid workers who are also disproportionately Black and People of Color.

Unlike artists, from whom dissent is expected, dissent by museum workers is carefully managed and in the case of visitor-facing staff might easily lead to dismissal. It is in solidarity with these workers, and on behalf of their demands, that W.A.G.E. invites artists in the 2019 Whitney Biennial to do two things: demand to be paid for the content they provide and withhold that content until Whitney staff demands are met.

This is a rare opportunity for a group of artists to collectively use their exceptional status of ‘getting to have it both ways’ in support of those who do not. Having it both ways means being able to dissent and get paid. We believe that everyone should get to have it both ways—and until everyone does, the right to exceptionality will remain our demand.

Email: info@wageforwork.com

Website: <https://wageforwork.com/wagency/2019-whitney-biennial>

#DecolonizeThisPlace #J26 #WhitneyBiennial2019