

# Art, Freedom, and the Politics of Social Justice

## INTRODUCTION

June 1, 2018

National  
Coalition  
Against  
Censorship

### National Coalition Against Censorship

NCAC's mission is to promote freedom of thought, inquiry and expression and to oppose censorship in all its forms.

Over the past few years, artworks that touch upon painful histories have sparked heated controversies. While the artists behind such works have invariably had a social purpose and sought to tackle the political issues plaguing our present, the works themselves have elicited charges of insensitivity, cultural appropriation, and racism. Many discussions surrounding these works have questioned whether an artist from a dominant racial group has the right to make artworks about a story of core importance to a racial or ethnic group to which they do not belong, or to make use of images, ideas, or characters belonging to the traditions of culturally marginalized groups.

The outrage over such artworks—from South African artist Brett Bailey's Barbican show "Exhibit B" to Dana Schutz's painting "Open Casket" at the 2017 Whitney Biennial and Sam Durant's "Scaffold" at the Walker Art Center—has contributed to a tense climate in the art world.

Worse than being outsiders, protesters claim, white artists belong to a dominant racial group that continues to structurally privilege itself at the expense of people of color. As such, racially charged artwork produced by white artists is suspect at best; at worst, it perpetuates racism and oppression. Whereas artists have the freedom to produce whatever they wish, the institutions that display such works are held to a different standard of responsibility: one that extends beyond the artist, the artwork and the principles of creative freedom to encompass the community and audiences these institutions serve, as well as the ideals of social justice.

While they welcome protest and critique, free speech advocates draw a line at the removal or destruction of artworks. While they may admit that platforms for speech reflect social inequalities, and that words and images help perpetuate social divisions and racist attitudes, their solution to these problems lies in supporting more speech rather than less. In line with this general principle, in recent controversies involving offense and trauma, free speech advocates have called on institutions to host dialogue and conversation. While they recognize the multiple responsibilities of art institutions, they privilege the open exchange of ideas over any specific social program.

The National Coalition Against Censorship's [Arts Advocacy Program](#) invited artists, curators, and writers to think across disagreements and share their thoughts on the current debate over cultural appropriation. We asked the respondents to be as direct and uncensored as possible.

This roundtable is conceived as an ongoing conversation. We will be publishing commissioned responses to the five initial contributions on a rolling basis over the summer. To be advised of future contributions, [subscribe](#)

to ArtsEverywhere's bi-weekly newsletter. If you would like to make a substantive and thoughtful contribution to this conversation, please enter it in the comments section at the bottom of this roundtable. We will be publishing selected comments. We reserve the right to edit any published comments for clarity and length.

## RESPONSES



**Sam Durant**

### Talking About History

There are many factors contributing to the current climate of tribalism and polarization in North American culture today, most of them a result of long-term historical developments, of social and cultural oppression and violence. Pankaj Mishra's *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment* both offer convincing arguments for how and why we are where we are today; both of them base these arguments in history.

One contemporary response to the injustices of the past—with significant consequences in the art world—is the turn towards a politics of identity and the claims to ownership of certain cultural expressions. Both are based on personal experience, with an emphasis on the historical trauma affecting the group to which an individual belongs.

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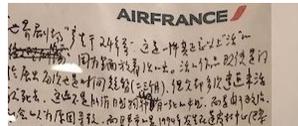
**Noelle Garcia**

### The Feeling: The Freedom to Offend/ The Freedom to Say You Hurt Me/ The Hope You Hear Me

I'm an Indigenous woman, I'm well educated, I'm a mother, I have a good job and people listen to me. Even better, I teach teachers, so there are layers of people that listen to me. I'm just one of many Indigenous people that are being heard.

I wonder why we are being heard now. Not just heard, sometimes supported. When Sam Durant erected "Scaffold" there was an outcry. The Indigenous community was pained because it referenced the gallows used to hang 38 Dakota warriors. Eventually, Durant transferred the intellectual property rights of the work to the Dakota Nation. This act gave the impression that Durant sincerely heard and reacted to the voices of the Indigenous community. A community expressed pain and the artist responded, transforming the art into something different.

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**Hou Hanru**

### Ten Theses Against the Activism of "Good Morals"

4. All complexity, contradiction, uncertainty, imagination, and enigma—or all that renders ART meaningful, beautiful, and powerful, and also "useful"—are reduced and even erased in favor of the spectacular and hence the speculative: that which is easy to identify, "understand," consume, and become eventually profitable. For "difficult art" it becomes even more difficult to survive, since the institutions and media tend to—or are forced to—embrace the logic of the comfortable, the safe, or the tokenistic, in order to be more popular.

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**Alan Michelson**

### Subject Matters

The recent controversy over the exhibitions by American art institutions of works by white artists depicting traumatic events in the histories of non-whites, during which people of color have stepped forward to register the offensiveness of these representations to their communities, is part of a larger political landscape that includes Idle No More, Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, Decolonize This Place, and other grassroots challenges to entrenched power. As a contemporary Mohawk artist, what surprises me most about the controversy is the fact that as recently as 2017 it came as such a surprise to the artists, curators, and institutions involved. And also that, in some quarters, the challenges were received as threatening calls for censorship, when in fact they were more the opposite—calls for voices against the insidious forms of censorship practiced by white-dominated art institutions on non-white groups. White supremacy, no matter how passively or unwittingly sheltered, is suppression—the silencing of voices and the erasure of presence. Shamefully, the art world is one of its preservers.

[View Full Response](#)



**Vanessa Place**



**Dexter Wimberly**



**Karyn Olivier**

Karyn Olivier

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Witness



Karyn Olivier, 'The Battle is Joined,' 2017. Public Art Commission, Monument Lab, Mural Arts, Vernon Park, Philadelphia © Copyright KARYN OLIVIER · All rights reserved.

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In my work, multiple histories intersect and collapse in contact with present-day narratives. I try to counter a single perspective (which is usually read, misleadingly, as “universal”) with one that’s complex and messy and thus mirrors our histories in a more honest way.

I have been thinking about monuments and historical sculpture for some time now—about what they represent and what they can become. My recent discovery of the sixteenth century Talking Statues of Rome resonated with my work and made me think of it in a fresh light. These statues were situated in public areas where anonymous messages could be attached to them, turning them into sites for protest, political dissent, critique, and commentary on religious and political authorities. At times, multiple responses posted on adjacent statues created an ongoing dialogue between multiple histories and shifting authors. The statuary became active, mutable, temporal, and contemporary. Works of art were transformed into tools, instruments, guardians—the keepers and protectors of democracy. My public interventions often seek to transform existing monuments in a similar way.

Last fall, I installed a [public work](#) in Philadelphia’s historical Vernon Park. In this sculpture, *The Battle is Joined*, I created my own version of a talking statue where I “initiated” a conversation between two existing monuments in the park—the [Pastorius Monument](#), which honors Daniel Pastorius, a German settler who led the first Quaker protest against slavery in 1688, and the Battle of Germantown Memorial, honoring a George Washington-led revolutionary war battle. The Pastorius Monument was boxed over during World War I and II because the look of the monument was perceived to be “too Germanic.” I thought about the paradox of an immigrant (Pastorius), fighting for blacks’ freedom from slavery, and Washington, who was fighting for the freedom of America from British rule, while owning slaves. I replicated the concealment, but covered the Battle Memorial instead. A mirrored facade was added, reflecting in real-time viewers and the ever-changing landscape.

I didn’t want to just duplicate history. I had to remix it in some way, to find a way to activate the present moment. I thought about what it might mean to rally around an object that reminds us that we are a community, that we’re a neighborhood, that we’re empowered; that in our personal and our civic lives, we have a responsibility. The mirror allowed this, reflecting the neighborhood’s current demographic, which is predominantly African American (it was once a German immigrant stronghold). I also suspected if I mirrored the encasement, the structure would disappear (from varying vantage points), participating in the ongoing conversation and debate around Confederate monuments. As one approached the piece, it transitioned from being invisible to being larger than life. Then, when confronted up close, seeing one’s own reflection, you had to

acknowledge your literal presence and the fact that you, in essence, become the monument.



Karyn Olivier's "Witness", 2018. Public art installation, Memorial Hall, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY © Copyright KARYN OLIVIER · All rights reserved.

This past spring I created *Witness*, a site-specific installation at the University of Kentucky. I hoped to [deepen the dialogue around a controversial New Deal-era](#)

[mural](#) depicting a history of Kentucky that many believed sanitized the portrayal of slavery and presented stereotypes and caricatures of people of color.

For this [project](#) I decided to reproduce the historical mural's African American and Native American figures, inserting these images onto the ceiling of the vestibule, which was also gold-leafed—referencing sacred paintings, churches, and cathedrals from the Byzantine and Renaissance periods. This effectively transported these anonymous figures into a heavenly space. I hoped one reading of my use of gold leaf would be to elevate these oppressed figures—those who were deemed lowly—to the divine.

The imagery in the mural depicts the subjugated, performing mundane chores and activities (while neglecting to reveal their depth of servitude or the range of horrific acts that kept them there). I wanted these figures on the ceiling to reinforce the notion or possibility of rebirth—perhaps spiritually, but more importantly through the viewer's reinvestigation, interrogation, and reckoning with our country's complex histories. Around the base of the dome is a Frederick Douglass quotation: "There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven, that does not know that slavery is wrong for him." I wanted this quote to address the anonymous figures in the original mural as well as my relocated ones—calling out by name the historical sin that slavery represents.

The hope is for my work to dissect, critique or reimagine our understanding and relationship to these complicated sites—and therefore with the history they represent. I often think of this quote by James Baldwin and my responsibility as an artist: "The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides."



Detail of Karyn Olivier's "Witness", 2018. Public art installation, Memorial Hall, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY © Copyright KARYN OLIVIER · All rights reserved.



## **Karyn Olivier**

Karyn Olivier (b. Trinidad and Tobago) received her M.F.A. at Cranbrook Academy of Art and her B.A. at Dartmouth College. She has exhibited her work widely. Olivier is currently an associate professor and program head of sculpture at Tyler School of Art.