

The New York Times

Eight Artists Withdraw From Whitney Biennial Over Board Member's Ties to Tear Gas

The artists cited the museum's "inertia" over calls to remove Warren B. Kanders.



The artist Nicole Eisenman asked that her sculpture "Procession" be withdrawn from the Whitney Biennial for the remainder of the show, which closes Sept. 22. Eight artists in all have called for works to be removed. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

By Colin Moynihan

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Eight artists have asked the Whitney Museum of American Art to remove their works from this year's Biennial, citing what they describe as the museum's lack of response to calls for the resignation of a board member with ties to the sale of military supplies, including tear gas.

Four of the artists withdrew on Friday; the rebellion continued throughout Saturday as four more followed suit. There are 75 artists and collectives in the Whitney Biennial, which closes on Sept. 22.

Since March, there have been protests at the museum and calls from artists and scholars for the museum to remove the trustee, Warren B. Kanders, who owns a company that distributes law-enforcement equipment, the Safariland Group. Mr. Kanders has vigorously defended the company. One artist selected for the Biennial declined to participate before the exhibit opened because of Mr. Kanders's business. Dozens of others called for Mr. Kanders to resign, even as they took part.

In a letter to the Whitney Biennial curators that was first reported on Friday by Artforum, the four artists, Korakrit Arunanondchai, Meriem Benani, Nicole Eisenman and Nicholas Galanin, said they were angry when they learned of Mr. Kanders's ties to Safariland, but "were well into fabrication of major pieces" for the Biennial and decided to forge ahead.

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"The Museum's continued failure to respond in any meaningful way to growing pressure from artists and activists has made our participation untenable," the four wrote in a copy of the letter provided to The New York Times. "The Museum's inertia has turned the screw, and we refuse further complicity with Kanders and his technologies of violence."

On Saturday morning, three additional artists said they were withdrawing work in solidarity. Eddie Arroyo and Agustina Woodgate announced through their gallery, Spinello Projects, of Miami, Fla., that "the request is intended as condemnation of Warren Kanders' continued presence as Vice Chair of the Board and the Museum's continued failure to respond in any meaningful way to growing pressure from artists and activists."

A seventh artist, Christine Sun Kim, said in an email to The New York Times on Saturday that she, too, had asked for her work to be withdrawn from the Biennial.

"As a mother to a 2-year-old daughter, it terrifies me that my work is currently part of a platform that is now strongly associated with Kanders' teargas-producing company Safariland," she wrote to curators. "I do not want her to grow up in a world where free and peaceful expression is countered with means that have left people injured and dead."



A protest at the Whitney in May over a trustee, Warren B. Kanders, the owner of a company that produces military supplies, including tear gas. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

The eighth to ask that work be withdrawn was Forensic Architecture, a London-based research group, which produced a 10-minute video that directly addressed the controversy over Mr. Kanders, called “Triple-Chaser.” (It was made with Praxis Films, run by the filmmaker Laura Poitras.) The title comes from a type of tear-gas grenade manufactured by Safariland that has allegedly been used against civilians at the United States-Mexico border and elsewhere during protests.

Eyal Weizman, the founder and director of Forensic Architecture, said in an interview that the group had written to the curators on Saturday to remove “Triple-Chaser” and accompanying films. He added that Forensic Architecture asked that those films be replaced by a statement from the group about its new investigation suggesting that bullets made by a company, Sierra Bullets — which it alleges has ties to Mr. Kanders — were used by the Israeli forces against civilian protesters in Gaza in 2018.

Mr. Kanders declined to comment Friday and Saturday through a spokesman.

In a written statement on Friday, Adam D. Weinberg, the Whitney’s director, acknowledged the four artists’ letter to the curators.

“The Whitney respects the opinions of all the artists it exhibits and stands by their right to express themselves freely,” the statement said. “While the

Whitney is saddened by this decision, we will of course comply with the artists' request."

Tom Eccles, the executive director of the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, said that the artists who had asked for their works to be withdrawn appeared to have the upper hand. "The artists won this one," he said.

"The latest salvo by artists is a surprisingly devastating move at rapid speed," he added.

The Whitney paid a \$1,500 honorarium to participating artists, including six of the artists who have asked to have their work withdrawn. (The museum said the additional payments were underway.) It is not known if any of the eight artists intend to return the fees.

The Biennial, which began as an annual show in 1932 and adopted its current schedule in 1973, has often included politically tinged works. This year's exhibition addressed, among other topics, N.F.L. players taking a pregame knee to protest police violence against African-American men and women; and the 1989 Central Park jogger case, in which a group of black and Latino teenagers were wrongly accused and convicted of assaulting and raping a white woman.

The last time work was publicly withdrawn from a Biennial was 2014, when the YAMS, a collective of artists, removed their video on race and black identity, contending another project in the show was racially insensitive. In 2017, Dana Schutz's painting "Open Casket" drew sustained protests for its abstracted portrayal of the corpse of the black teenager Emmett Till, whose lynching in 1955 helped spur the civil rights movement. The work, however, remained on view.

Friday's letter from the four artists withdrawing their work came on the heels of an essay, "The Tear Gas Biennial," in *Artforum* two days earlier that called on artists to boycott the exhibition.

The museum said it had reached out to artists over their requests to remove works, among them a large-scale sculpture by Nicole Eisenman called "Procession," which sprawls across the sixth-floor terrace. Also outside on the fifth floor is a "video viewing" station by Meriem Bennani called "Mission Teens," which follows a group of teenage schoolgirls in Rabat, Morocco.

Some Biennial artists said Saturday that they respect the decision by fellow artists to withdraw from the exhibition but wanted their work to remain in the Whitney.

Sofía Gallisá Muriente, from San Juan, said in an email that her work addresses the "colonialism of Puerto Rico," and that she believes "in the



Meriem Bennani, one of the original four artists who signed the letter, requested that her “video viewing” station called “Mission Teens,” which follows a group of teenage schoolgirls in Rabat, Morocco, be removed. Christopher Gregory for The New York Times

power and importance of that piece to speak to our current political situation.”

Another artist, Brendan Fernandes, who created a sculptural installation animated at times by dancers, said his work is “a form of protest within the system.”

He added, “The institution will only change when you’re in it.”

Attention was focused on Mr. Kanders late last year, when the art website Hyperallergic published photos showing metal canisters marked with Safariland’s name. The canisters were said to have been found where the American authorities used tear gas to disperse hundreds of migrants running toward a crossing from Tijuana to San Diego.

Many Whitney employees signed a letter expressing dismay. Mr. Kanders replied with a letter expressing pride in Safariland, which also sells protective suits and armor, adding that the company plays no role in deciding how its products are used.

In a letter last winter to staff members and trustees, Mr. Weinberg wrote that the museum has “a critical and urgent” role in recognizing “unheard and unwanted voices,” but added that it “cannot right all the ills of an un-

just world.”

And about two weeks before the Biennial opened in mid-May, roughly two-thirds of the 75 participating artists and collectives added their names to the letter urging the museum to remove Mr. Kandors as vice chairman of the board.

On the opening night of the Biennial, protesters draped a black banner reading “When We Breathe We Breathe Together” from an upper floor of the museum. Later they marched to Mr. Kandors’s home in Greenwich Village, taking with them a rolling installation in the form of a five-foot-tall silver cylinder emblazoned with the words “tear gas.”