

UPDATED: SEP 13, 2018 · ORIGINAL: AUG 5, 2017

Curation and Colonization in Art

RAY COOK

Dina Gilio-Whitaker (author, Research Associate at the Center for World Indigenous Studies) Ruth Hopkins, (biologist, writer and judge), Shanna Ketchum-Heap of Birds (art historian, essayist, doctoral candidate) and Missy Whiteman (writer, director and producer for independent Indigenous film) cast a critical eye over elements of the art world in an exchange moderated by Opinions Editor Ray Cook and Columnist Alex Jacobs.



Ray Cook

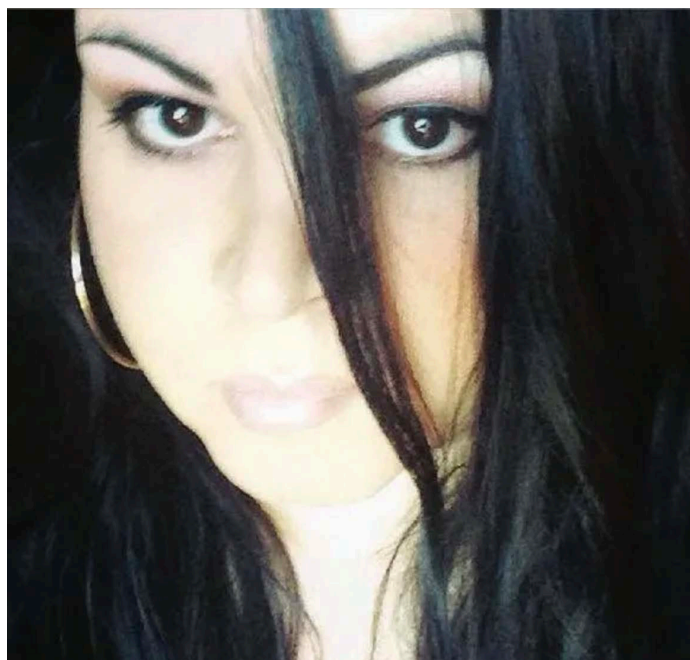
RAY COOK: In light of the recent controversy at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, we have to ask the question: Are museums still essentially colonial institutions?

DINA GILIO-WHITAKER: This latest controversy in the Indian art world, among others, has reinvigorated old questions that have haunted artists and policymakers for decades. In the museum business (for lack of a better term) the Walker Art Center's ill-fated *Scaffold* exhibit shocked local Native people for its insensitive portrayal of a particularly painful episode in Dakota history, resulting in the local community agreeing to the burning of the \$75,000 exhibit.



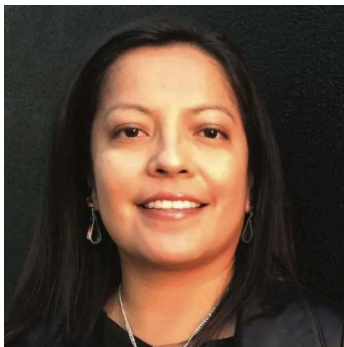
Dina Gilio-Whitaker

Given the Eurocentric nature of museums, yes, of course they are colonial institutions: There were no such things as museums before Europeans arrived here. While museums have evolved over generations from institutions that were perhaps the most guilty of portraying Native peoples as extinct, to presenting the contemporary issues of modern Native peoples (such as the Autry's exhibit on environmental issues Native people face today), they are still subject to major mistakes, especially when non-Native people who don't fully understand the complexity of Indigenous issues are in charge. Such is the case of *Scaffold*. If Native people who were the subject of that historical episode were in charge, that exhibit would never have happened the way it did.



Ruth Hopkins

RUTH HOPKINS: When I first saw the *Scaffold* sculpture, I had a strong visceral reaction. I was enraged, and simultaneously stricken with deep sadness. I got sick to my stomach. I've experienced a lot of tragedy and hardship as a Dakota woman who was born and raised on reservations in North and South Dakota, but this was something more. Perhaps it was blood memory. My ancestors were directly involved in the Minnesota Uprising of 1862. Some were present at the hanging that day, when 38 of our warriors were put to death in the largest mass execution in U.S. history. White women ripped an infant from a Dakota woman's arms and bashed its brains in until the baby was dead. We still sing the song our ancestors sung that day. I'm the descendant of Dakota exiles, expelled from Minnesota after the governor put a bounty on our scalps (i.e., red skins).



Shanna Ketchum-Heap of Birds

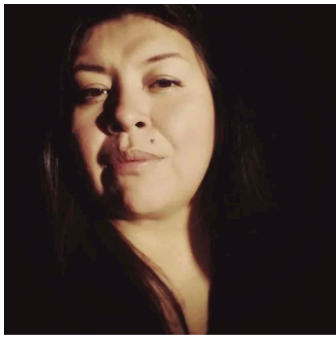
SHANNA KETCHUM-HEAP OF BIRDS: My husband Edgar Heap of Birds, a Cheyenne-Arapaho artist, and I were scheduled to talk at the Walker Art Center months ahead of the controversy. When I read about the content of *Scaffold* and the aims of the artist, Sam Durant, to bring to light the issues of capital punishment in the U.S, I thought this was in keeping with his larger body of work that often seeks to build awareness around the marginalized histories of non-white communities in the U.S. However, I was surprised at the way it was implemented into the community of Minneapolis without the input, specifically, of the large Dakota community located in the vicinity of the Twin Cities.

I say that because the Walker Art Center previously commissioned Building Minnesota in 1990 by my husband. He installed 40 metal signs along the Mississippi River on the east side of downtown Minneapolis to memorialize the Dakota warriors (known today as the Dakota 38+2) executed at the end of the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. Each warrior was named, local Native community members helped install the piece, and many tied offerings on them in remembrance.

HOPKINS: Would a German go to Israel and install a gas chamber as an 'art piece'? Yet the Walker did this, erecting a monument of Native genocide, on Dakota homelands. There was no excuse for this oversight, this mockery. Dakota people, whose ancestors survived these events and are related to those who were hung that day, are literally just down the street. There are Native artists in Minneapolis, an American Indian Center, and tribal communities surrounding the metro.

What they did was deeply hurtful. When my Dakota grandmother encountered evil objects, she burned them and buried them. Personally, that's what I feel should be done with the piece. This is the price of such callous arrogance. There's a saying, "nothing about us, without us." I hope the Walker has learned this lesson through this experience.

KETCHUM-HEAP OF BIRDS: Most museums continue to represent the white power structures that they were built upon. Therefore, those institutions are going to privilege the voices, perspectives, and histories with artistic representations that reflect, glorify, and perpetuate that image of them. I think the Walker is trying to ameliorate the situation extending from the Scaffold controversy. They continue to work with and listen to the Dakota community and the artist, Sam Durant, agreed to the dismantling of the sculpture and granted intellectual property rights of the work to the Dakota people. All in all, I think the Scaffold controversy presented an opportunity for Native people to voice their concerns which resulted in the wider art community's critical reevaluation of their curating practices and civic responsibility to all members of the public sphere beyond the usual crowd.



Missy Whiteman

MISSY WHITEMAN: I grew up in Minneapolis during a time when the Native arts community flourished and partnered quite frequently with the Walker, the Minneapolis Institution of Art, and other long-standing arts organizations in the Twin Cities such as Intermedia Arts. There was a strong representation and presence of Native art because a small nonprofit was established in the 1980s by practicing Native artists. The Native Arts Circle came from a need for advocacy and support for Native artists in the mainstream arts arena.

Also, during this time my father Ernest Whiteman, a practicing artist, worked at the Walker Art Center in the education department. He would always tell me, “We have a place in these institutions, we belong here.” He also taught me that we have to go above and beyond our capabilities as Native artists, because we are representing our people. The foundation that was created by artists like him was dismantled due to quickly diminishing National and state funding, and corporate takeover of the arts.

WHITAKER: It’s a harsh reality that the modern Indian art world is just a microcosm of the colonized society we were dragged into. Asking whether or not it can be decolonized is like asking if capitalism can be decolonized. However, when I go home to the reservation there are sometimes trade fairs, the old way. This is where people simply trade items of perceived equal value in the context of cultural practice. It’s a wonderful way to obtain handmade items or needed materials, and gives special meaning to those items, compared to having to shell out money for something that has been given an artificial value. That type of transaction is different in that it doesn’t provide the kind of living you need to pay your bills, but it’s far more civilized and human.

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