

# Floyd Case Forces Arts Groups to Enter the Fray

Cultural institutions are feeling compelled to stand up for racial justice, but artists and activists want action, not just statements of solidarity.

**By Robin Pogrebin and Julia Jacobs**

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The apologies keep coming.

After the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo., allowed the police to use its property to stage a response to a protest over George Floyd's death, its director asked the police to gather elsewhere and issued a public apology.

When the Getty was criticized for putting out "vague" social media posts calling "for equity and fairness" that failed to mention Mr. Floyd, who died in police custody in Minneapolis on May 25, its chief executive pledged to do better.

The language of contrition was similar from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art after it was criticized for responding to Mr. Floyd's death with an Instagram post: an image of a work by the artist Glenn Ligon — who is black — without any statement from the institution.

"We can do better," the apology said. The museum followed up with a second apology days later for having disabled comments in response to criticism of its initial post.

For decades, cultural organizations have generally opted out of politically heated debates, positioning themselves as neutral territory and preferring to let the artists they present do the opining. As civic institutions often supported by taxpayer dollars, they have historically eschewed political allegiances.

But this time is different.

In the period of protests, many arts organizations have entered the fray. Some of their public messages have been commended as better than silence; others criticized as tone deaf and too little too late.



The Alpha Omega Theatrical Dance Company in New York posted signs showing support for Black Lives Matter and racial justice efforts. Gabriela Bhaskar for The New York Times

Such efforts to meaningfully contribute to the conversation are especially sensitive because many of the institutions are led by white executives who answer to boards largely made up of wealthy white trustees. That composition has long fueled suspicion that arts organizations are inherently resistant to — or incapable of — real change.

“It’s not enough to issue these toothless statements,” tweeted Adrienne Russell, a writer, museums specialist and former employee at the Nelson-Atkins, “and that’s why I wish museums would just be quiet unless they’re going to tell the truth.”

When the Metropolitan Opera tweeted last week that there was “no place for racism in the arts,” several people commented on social media that the company had never performed an opera by a black composer. (Their first — Terence Blanchard's “Fire Shut Up in My Bones” — was announced last year but has yet to be performed.)

“I do not think art museums have done enough,” Chris Anagnos, the executive director of the Association of Art Museum Directors, said in a statement on the organization’s website. “We have dabbled around the edges of the work, but in our place of privilege we will never live up to the statement that ‘museums are for everyone’ unless we begin to confront, examine and dismantle the various structures that brought us to this point.”

Some responses have landed more successfully than others, namely the impassioned statement from Lonnie G. Bunch III, the secretary of the Smithsonian, who called on his professional cohort to step up.



In his statement, Lonnie G. Bunch III, secretary of the Smithsonian, urged his colleagues in the museum world to do more to address racial injustice. Andrew Harnik/Associated Press

“Will we join the struggle to seek justice and equality?” Mr. Bunch said. “Will we heed the call of courageous figures throughout history who spoke out against slavery, marched on for voting rights, and sat in for basic equality? Will we challenge the nation to live up to its founding ideals? In the memory of those taken from us and for the good of the country, I hope that we do.”

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Other institutions tried a pragmatic approach. In New York, Off Broadway and Brooklyn theaters, as well as the Brooklyn Museum and MoMA PS1, have offered restroom access to protesters. Theaters in cities such as Oakland, Calif.; Austin, Texas; and Washington, have done the same. The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture created an online portal for a discussion about race.

The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis announced it would no longer contract the services of the local police department for events until the law enforcement agency “implements meaningful change by demilitarizing training programs, holding officers accountable for the use of excessive force and treating communities of color with dignity and respect.” Four Minneapolis officers were charged in connection with Mr. Floyd’s death.

Many organizations that view themselves as enlightened, progressive institutions decided they could no longer sit on the sidelines in order to avoid controversy.

“We are part of that problem — the racism is within us — as institutions that are always telling our audience what’s good art and making choices that set up or reinforce cultural orders,” said Michael Govan, the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. “We have an ability to critique and change those orders.”

Officials of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo., apologized after allowing the police to use its grounds to stage a response to a protest about the death of George Floyd. Katie Currid for The New York Times

Julián Zugazagoitia, the director of the Nelson-Atkins Museum. Steve Hebert for The New York Times

The conversation about the complacency of arts groups was building long before their recent public statements of solidarity or their posting of black boxes and #BlackoutTuesday on Instagram were judged insufficient.

The Whitney Museum of American Art faced criticism when it featured in its 2017 Biennial exhibition a painting by the white artist Dana Schutz of the lynched black teenager Emmett Till, incurring protests. It kept the painting on the wall, saying it raised important questions.

Last year, the museum was the site of multiple demonstrations because one of its trustees, Warren B. Kanders, owns a company that sold the tear gas that was reportedly used on immigrants at the border. He ultimately felt compelled to step down.

Four of the 14 curators now are people of color, and the museum has featured black artists in earnest but acknowledges there is much more to do. “Everybody has to look at themselves and say, ‘We’re all not doing this as well as we should be,’” said Adam D. Weinberg, the museum’s director. “If you don’t have input from other voices, you’re just going to get the same answers.”

Protesters last year at the Whitney Museum in New York draped a banner over an edge of the building. Andrew White for The New York Times

Many of these cultural organizations did not respond at all when Amadou Diallo was shot dead by the police in the Bronx in 1999 or Michael Brown was killed by an officer in Ferguson, Mo., in 2014. But this time around, the approach has changed, whether it’s because the politics of the moment have triggered advocacy or because the multiple fatal encounters with the police can no longer be ignored.

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“They’re using language that they’ve never used before in terms of racism and white supremacy,” Melanie A. Adams, the director of the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum, said of museums. She has worked as a facilitator of workshops on topics related to museums and race.

Ms. Adams said that she had noticed a shift in museum attitudes after the shooting of Mr. Brown and believes some of the change may be attributable to more young activists working in institutions. The challenge, she said, will be sustaining the discussion that currently feels so urgent. “Sometimes with these situations, for the next few months we’ll all wave the social justice flag, and then we’ll go back to our corners,” she said, “I’m hoping that’s not going to be what happens this time.”

Some efforts have been more symbolic. Last Tuesday, the Kennedy Center announced that its lights would be dimmed for nine nights in honor of Mr. Floyd, marking the final nine minutes of his life.

Next Saturday, a number of major institutions including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and the Detroit Institute of Arts plan to devote the home pages of their websites to a 24-hour stream of “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death,” the 2016 video by the artist Arthur Jafa.

“No institutional leader has all the answers right now,” said Max Hollein, the director of the Met. “There is a moment when you reflect, when you have to listen.”

Mr. Hollein learned this lesson the hard way last week when Mr. Ligon objected to the use of one of his artworks in the Met’s recent social media post. “I know it’s #nationalreachouttoblackfolksweek but could y’all just stop,” Mr. Ligon said on Instagram. “Or ask me first?”

Mr. Hollein said he has apologized directly to Mr. Ligon.

The Museum of Modern Art will present a special screening of Mr. Jafa’s 2018 “akingdoncomethas” — more than 100 minutes of black church services — on June 13 and has posted a list of organizations that fight racism and support equality.

“We can change the stories we tell in the galleries and we have to do the work to make sure the institution reflects the richness and diversity of our country,” said Glenn D. Lowry, MoMA’s director. “This is a moment of reckoning.”

Many arts leaders agree that the most effective response is institutional change — hiring more staff members of color; diversifying the board; presenting a range of programming.

“We need to revisit deeply everything — our organizational structures, the programs that we value, what exhibitions we should be doing,” said Julián Zugazagoitia, the director of the Nelson-Atkins who used to head El Museo del Barrio. “The actions speak more than declaratory statements.”

At the same time, change can cost money and some of the institutions pledging to diversify both their staffs and the moneyed boards that support their work are already facing severe financial problems caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Laura Raicovich, the politically outspoken former director of the Queens Museum, is currently working on a book due out next year, tentatively titled “The Myth of Museums: Why Cultural Institutions Can’t Be Neutral in an Age of Protest.”

In 2018, she stepped down after clashing with her board over an event sponsored by the Israeli government and over what, she believed, was her public support for young undocumented immigrants.

She said that museums should abandon the pretense of a united front. “It’s time for institutions to drop the monolithic responses,” she said, “to be more transparent about the different conversations happening inside of a museum.”

James Cuno, the president of the Getty Trust, said he was comfortable with having had to revise his museum’s statement in response to criticism. “It was extremely important that our staff brought it to our attention,” he said. “It was the way institutions should work.”

The Guggenheim Museum, which did not have a black curator on staff until last year, has for several months been working with an outside diversity consultant, its director, Richard Armstrong, said. Its statement of support for Blackout Tuesday drew criticism from Chaédria LaBouvier, who organized the Guggenheim’s Basquiat show last year as a guest curator. She has said her experience at the museum was fraught with racism. Among the examples she cited was her exclusion from a museum panel that discussed the exhibition she designed.

Mr. Armstrong, speaking broadly in an interview, said that the museum should strive to be an ethical leader but that there invariably would be missteps.

“One of the missing links in our moving forward as a culture is a greater sense of forgiveness. We’ve made mistakes, we’ve tried as much as possible to address them and we will go on making mistakes.”

But some people in the art world are growing tired of what they view as excuses. After the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art apologized for blocking from view a critical comment from a former employee named Taylor Brandon, who is black, two artists, Leila Weefur and Elena Gross, along with the artists’ collective Heavy Breathing and others, decided to pull their work from a residency program. They wanted to send a clear message that the museum needs to address its institutional racism rather than just release statements of solidarity.

“It is their job to figure out how to resolve this problem,” Weefur said. “Do not put the labor solely on the artist.”