

What Do You Do When a Project You Curate Is Censored By the State?

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Josephine Meckseper, "Untitled (Flag 2)" at the University of Kansas, from the Pledges of Allegiance project (2018) (photo by Andy White/KU Marketing Communications)

For three weeks this past July, I sat with my colleagues in a gallery at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, where I work as a curator. A comfortable seating arrangement was set up for talking and thinking together in front of Josephine Meckseper's "Untitled (Flag 2)" — a collage work featuring an abstract drip painting that resembles the contours of the United States superimposed onto a graphic design of the US flag. We took turns sitting for two-hour shifts during the museum's visiting hours, as visitors came to see the artwork that had sparked a nationwide debate about the first amendment and the influence of politics at universities.

The work was part of a public art project, called the Pledges of Allegiance, organized by Creative Time in New York. For the series, Creative Time commissioned 16 prominent contemporary artists — including LaToya Ruby Frazier, Yoko Ono, Trevor Paglen, and

Pedro Reyes — to create works of art on nylon flags about issues of political importance to them. Participating organizations across the country raised and lowered these flags in unison in a roughly month-long rotating display.

The Spencer Museum's decision to participate was based primarily on our commitment to engage in public dialogue with our communities and to expose students to the voices of the artists on the project's roster. We installed a flagpole in front of The Commons, our campus partner on the project, specifically for the purpose of displaying the *Pledges of Allegiance* flags, where they would be visible to passersby. Two placards were placed at the foot of the flagpole. One gave information about the series as a whole, and the other was changed out regularly to give information about each individual flag on display.

On Wednesday, July 11, "Untitled (Flag 2)" was removed from its flagpole by order of university administration and delivered to the Spencer Museum. Apparently, some viewers had misinterpreted the artwork as a desecrated US flag. The Governor and Kansas Secretary of State, who are in a race for the 2018 gubernatorial election in November, both called for the artwork to be removed from our flagpole. The gubernatorial primary was one week after the installation ended. The same politicians later pushed for the work's removal from campus entirely, but university administration stood by the work's remaining on display within the museum. I was never consulted on the decision to move the work, but as the curatorial lead on the *Pledges* project at the Spencer Museum, two things were within my power: to remain vigilantly committed to keeping the work on continuous public display through the run of the project and to continue to support public dialogue.

From the moment Meckseper's flag arrived inside the museum, my fellow museum workers and I continued its exhibition. We installed the work in a gallery specifically designed to allow museum staffers to respond to the immediate needs of our communities. We made a staff member available for discussion during all gallery hours. We wrote extended explanatory text, with Creative Time staff securing a contextualizing image of Meckseper's earlier work, and brought out two plinths on which to display an educational binder and a notebook for public comments.

The museum's careful responsiveness made me proud to be working with our team, but the larger institutional reaction to politics that had evoked our response was deeply disheartening. The point of showcasing the *Pledges of Allegiance* series on a university campus was to model public engagement in difficult conversations from varying perspectives. Meckseper's work was not intended to be shown in a gallery.

On the morning of the flag's first full day on display inside the museum, I got ready for work with no idea how the day might unfold. I sat beside my partner and explained that on this morning, he should understand that I worked for a state university that allows

concealed weapons on campus, and that there had been some controversy around the *Pledges* art project. I assured him that I loved the work I did, that I loved him, and that I was happy. These are strange times.

On that first full day of “Untitled (Flag 2)”’s display in the Spencer Museum of Art, we spread the word, encouraging people to come to see the work and discuss it. The gallery was filled with allies and supporters. In the wake of the controversy, it was good to be with friends. But we never entered into this project seeking consensus.

As I sat in the gallery with Meckseper’s work over the following weeks—juggling other projects and deadlines in the background—I recalled how, while working at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2016, I was thanked for my “stewardship.” I had never heard the word “stewardship” used in a museum context. I was ambivalent about the word; I both endorsed *and* resisted the idea of being a “steward.” It at once appealed to me with its connotations of caregiving and repelled me through what I read as a patrimonial missionary impulse.

I have come to believe that ambivalence about institutional stewardship is an ethics. Institutional workers should never unconditionally support the institutions for which they work at the expense of the values those institutions purport to defend. The most effective museum worker may be the one whose allegiances are ultimately to self-criticism, especially when the institution is the subject of that critical reflection.

The tension between my roles as a private citizen and an institutional worker highlights the tension between my own strategies for political resistance and what is expected of me in the museums where I work. My ambivalence emerges out of my struggle to articulate my autonomy in the midst of institutional power and along the private-public-institutional spectrum I work within. Artist Glenn Ligon’s 2007 neon sculpture, “Give us a Poem,” comes to mind, relentlessly flashing between the words “ME” and “WE.” Working within institutions can feel like being in a relationship with a jealous lover, one who attempts to limit my relationships with others. But if we leave institutions when they make choices we wouldn’t, who ends up running them and what do they come to stand for?

The late anthropologist and curator Ivan Karp said: “the most fundamental freedom ... is the freedom to resist.” Karp almost lost his job for bringing Guillermo Gómez-Peña and **Coco Fusco’s** 1992–1993 performance piece, “The Couple in a Cage,” to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC. The piece is well known for its exploration of the institutional exploitation of indigenous peoples. Karp argued again and again that institutions should be involved in the work of both reproducing *and* challenging our societies.

The story of Meckseper's work for *Pledges* may be retired in the news cycle, but we are still sorting through its implications for other ongoing community struggles. Graduate students are speaking out, and community groups are still involved in protests and counter-protests. The work is never done.

Museums must be answerable to their audiences and communities. That can be difficult, personally and professionally, but it is essential to a democratic society. Museums do not, however, seek permission from the state, and a democratic state should not want them to. If they did, our cultural institutions would become singular and their voices monolithic, and that would be a dark day for democracy.