

September 18, 2016,

Dear CAM Senior Directors,

Instead of writing you our letters of resignation, we, the Black administrative museum staff of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (CAM) and our allied colleagues, write this letter to express our concerns for curatorial, programmatic, and institutional adjustments in light of the actualization of the *Direct Drive* exhibition by Kelley Walker, curated by CAM's Chief Curator, Jeffrey Uslip.

It is with conviction we sustain belief that Uslip, Walker, Walker's body of works, and thus the museum at-large have--whether intentionally or not--created racial and cultural insensitivity, discomfort, and infractions upon museum staff, the museum's audiences, the St. Louis artist community, and the St. Louis community at-large through the presentation of these bodies of work and the support of the aforementioned artist.

Curated works in Kelley Walker's *Direct Drive* exhibition that inflict these expressed pains include:

- *Black Star Press*, which "comprises images of racial unrest that have been digitally printed on canvas, silkscreened with melted white, milk, and dark chocolate, and rotated."
- *Schema*, which is a full-vinyl wrap of a gallery room that repurposes and manipulates "photographs of Civil Rights protests overlaid with scanned Crest and Aquafresh whitening toothpaste."
- *KING* wall prints, which appropriate covers of the men's magazine of the same title to depict Black women in popular culture and hip-hop with Aquafresh whitening toothpaste scanned and smeared over their bodies. The work is expressed to "allude to consumption, objectification, and impermanence" of these figures.
- *White Michael Jackson*, which reproduces a photograph of the slain Black pop star during an arrest. The image is created in a white-scale CMYK printing process.

Such works have been expressed by staff and community members as untimely and insensitive in the context of the St. Louis community and the current nature of race relations within the United States. As St. Louis exists as a central location for the contemporary civil rights movement in the aftermath of the unrest in Ferguson, the work triggers a retraumatization of racial and regional pain. As black staff members, allies, and community members are constantly inundated with the recurring and semi-daily deaths of black people at the hands of police (even during the immediate days following the exhibition's opening), works within the *Black Star Press* inflict additional insult and injury to the injustices of our time. To provide a white, male artist the entirety of the museum and include works of this nature positions the museum and its staff in implicit support and perpetuation of these societal ills.

In addition, the curator and artist inflicted reprehensible insult to the community through behaviors and interactions that were exhibited during the Kelley Walker Artist Talk on Saturday, September 17, 2016. During this occasion, the artist provided insufficient answers and lack of clarification about the content and intentions of this work. When asked fair questions about his work, its content, and his process, the artist responded to audience members with perceived condescension and hostility. The behavior of the artist and curator to CAM's patrons and event participants was unsettling and not in reflective of CAM's standards, values, and commitment to serve as a space for hospitality, public forum, and inclusive audience and community engagement.

In the time period leading to the opening of the *Direct Drive* exhibition and the associated Artist Talk, we feel that expressed concerns and insight by CAM's museum staff were not honored and taken into consideration by the Chief Curator when organizing the exhibition, as numerous staff--particularly people of color and women--vocalized great discomfort and disdain on numerous occasions leading to the installation of the works and transpiring opening events. Additionally, consideration of CAM's community members and socio-cultural context and positioning were not taken into comprehensive account as advised throughout the curatorial process, and for this, the Chief Curator has proven to lack the humility and cultural understanding, competence, and sensitivity fit for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

We recognize that CAM is more than just exhibitions. It provides multiple, regular programs that allow for artists within our city to occupy its galleries. It facilitates an awareness of active studios in our metropolitan area, and the many opportunities for families and youth to grow through access to museum resources.

For the above reasons, we have chosen to not resign from the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. As external faces and frontline staff of audiences and community members to the museum, we understand the value and power of leveraging our presence within this circumstance to assure that our community is valued, listened to, and provided the platforms to voice their concerns, wisdom, and demands. Our resignation would not disrupt the structures of power that have brought us to this moment. We hold true in belief that the roles we occupy did not yield the infractions that have transpired, and for this, we should not be punished for the mistakes and failures in the integrity of the artist and curator in question. Instead, we choose to stand and refute these failures alongside our community to help assure the following:

- Formal personal apology by Chief Curator, Jeffrey Uslip, to the staff of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis,
- Formal and public written and/or verbal apologies by the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis to the individuals identified in the audience who were directly addressed and offended in the Kelley Walker Artist Talk on Saturday, September 17, 2016,
- Approval from Kelley Walker and Paula Cooper gallery to publicly post the video(s) which documented the Kelley Walker Artist Talk on Saturday, September 17, 2016,
- Formal removal of works within the *Direct Drive* exhibition that have inflicted blatant and expressed pain upon members of the St. Louis community,
- Resignation of the Chief Curator, Jeffrey Uslip,
- Assessment and implementation of current and new immediate and lasting institutional and curatorial policies that will reduce the intolerable racial and cultural insensitivity that have been displayed,
- Reassessment and adjustments of proper and consistent preparation procedures for all non-curatorial staff and departments prior to the openings of CAM exhibition, and
- Consideration of demands expressed by members of the St. Louis artist community in the context of these events.

As these considerations are being made, Black administrative staff members of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis commit to stand in solidarity and direct action with members of the St. Louis and St. Louis artist communities. We resolve to not defend institutional support of the artist and works on view; answer for the infractions inflicted upon museum staff, audience members, and community members at large; or be held responsible for the course correcting thereof. In accordance with our roles, our actions ensue as follows:

- The Community Engagement Manager (De Andrea Nichols) of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis commits to continue the programmatic and administrative obligations of the role with youth and families as defined while foregoing the following:
 - Entrance into any gallery spaces showcasing works from the *Direct Drive* exhibition,
 - Acceptance of tour requests by schools, individuals, and community groups for the *Direct Drive* exhibition,
 - Leadership and organization of on-site tours at the Museum,
 - Off-site presentations and art workshops related to works on view,
 - Purchase of any product or good from the Museum's cafe, shop, and online store,
 - Wearing of any exhibition-related and general Museum apparel or accessories in public engagements,
 - Meeting in any gallery of the Museum with staff, patrons, partners, and the public,
 - Participation in Art314 and Open Studios in accordance with community outcry and demands,
 - Participation in social and development events at the Museum.
- The Museum Educator (Lyndon Barrois Jr.) of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis commits to suspending the practice of leading tours and workshops as they relate to the *Direct Drive* exhibition, due

to a lack of resolve in the conceptual underpinnings of the work, and the undermining of such underpinnings by the artist's performance during the artist talk. He will continue the programmatic and administrative obligations of the role as follows:

- Continue engagements with the students currently involved in New Art in the Neighborhood and LEAP middle school intensive programs.
- Speak publicly and internally in support of community voices and values as an artist, educator, and member of the St. Louis community under the tenets of social and artistic responsibility, and empathy.

****Lyndon Barrois Jr. will remain as a panelist in the September 22nd, 2016 *Critical Conversations: Art and the Black Body* discussion at the museum, in regards to the issues in question.**

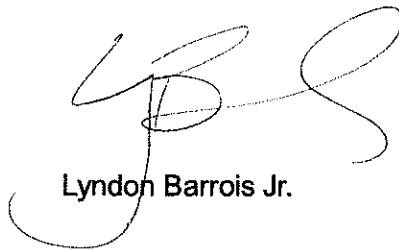
- The Visitor Services Manager (Victoria Donaldson) of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis commits to continuing her role of implementing staffing and assistance as needed but will speak publicly in support of the community voices and values as a member of the affected community and will relinquish the following responsibilities:
 - Entering the gallery spaces of the Museum that depict the appropriation of images of black bodies,
 - Leading and organizing on-site tours at the Museum,
 - Purchasing of any product or good from the Museum's cafe, shop, and online store,
 - Participating in Art314 and Open Studios in accordance with community outcry and demands,
 - Informing visitors about the works on view,
 - Promoting and/or advocating for programs, events or anything related to the Museum and/or the exhibition,
 - Meeting in the Museum's gallery and public meeting spaces with Museum staff, and
 - Participating in any social or development event at the Museum.

With these expressed concerns, considerations, and actions in mind, we choose to remain transparent, open, and available for any questions and further communication in these regards.


With earnest,



De Andrea Nichols



Lyndon Barrois Jr.



Victoria Donaldson

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