

ARTNEWS

'SPEAK OUT ON INAUGURATION DAY': WORDS AT THE WHITNEY MUSEUM TAKE AIM AT TRUMP

BY *Andy Battaglia and Andrew Russeth* POSTED 01/20/17 6:28 PM



The Guerrilla Girls handed out print outs of their *President Trump Announces New Commemorative Months* (2016) in the theater of the Whitney Museum.

©GUERRILLA GIRLS/COURTESY GUERRILLAGIRLS.COM

“Good morning, thanks for being together in this temple of art on this terrible day.” So went the opening words at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York for “Speak Out on Inauguration Day,” a program organized by Occupy Museums to coincide with the inauguration of President Donald J. Trump. The Whitney had gone pay-what-you-wish for the day, and a line of people stretched down Gansevoort Street waiting to get in. There was another line on the third floor as people waited to enter the theater hosting the event, which was packed with curators (Scott Rothkopf, Donna De Salvo, and other Whitney staff), artists (Gina Beavers, Hans Haacke, Simone Leigh), dealers (Bridget Finn, Josie Nash), writers (Hal Foster, Jerry Saltz), and other art and activist types.

The first speaker was Noah Fischer of Occupy Museums, who addressed the crowd in tones that registered as both defiant and subdued. “For many people this building itself represents the sharp edge of inequality,” he said in reference to moneyed funders and waves of gentrification that a new museum attracts. “But today we’re standing together, as allies.” He thanked technicians, janitors, and construction workers whose services helped make the space amenable, and he called attention to the many statements of solidarity—printed out and available for the taking on tables in the back—from sympathetic organizations in Argentina, Austria, Poland, Colombia, Hungary, and the United Kingdom. “We have many allies—more than we think,” Fischer said.

Next up was Megan Heuer, the Whitney’s director of public programs and public engagement, who promised “this is only a taste of what’s to come” before ceding the floor to other speakers. Laura Raicovich, director of the Queens Museum, spoke of museums’ precious possibilities for introducing audiences to “opportunities for civic agency.” Alicia Boyd, of MTOPP—Movement to Protect the People, talked about gentrification in Brooklyn and ways that municipal government can be as damaging as any other kind. “Please pay attention to your council person,” she said, clearly intent on replacing hers with someone more in line with her thinking.

Carin Kuoni, director of the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School, took a heady tack toward affirming that art and political practice can be one and the same. “If we declare art a philosophical practice,” she said, “we can operate on different timeframes simultaneously.” Artist-activist Mark Read railed against the “shit show” of recent weeks and months before praising participants in “Government Sachs,” a protest ongoing outside the offices of Goldman Sachs. Important to remember, Read added, is that in addition to forces that might seem more obvious, the recent election was “also a rejection of left liberal culture that’s focused on matters of representation and manners rather than material reality.”

Martha Rosler was up next. “I came to give you a rant,” she said, before leaning into a sort of polemical poem with a lot of rage and defiance to impart. At one point she seemed to choke up, stirred by her own words, before assuring the audience that she was not crying. “I’m just a little thunderstruck,” she said, “by an orange comet.”

Jenny Dubnau of the Artist Studio Affordability Project called on artists to engage with politics. “I’m going to put out a plea for artists to become policy experts, and become engaged with policy,” she said, adding later, “I’d like to see artists become citizen activists.”

The artist Gina Beavers echoed that call. “Whatever kind of work you make, cultural producers need to become better thinkers—we need criticality, not only for institutions and the quote-unquote ‘one percent,’ but also amongst ourselves,” she said, asking, “How many artists with master’s degrees forwarded me blatantly false news items during this election?”

Beavers beseeched her fellow artists to study the mechanisms of government, and to look closely at the intentions of politicians. “This is not a joke,” she said. “We got played by our ignorance of all of these issues, by our inability to think constructively and analytically and our inability to focus on the big picture...The truth is, we need to become better thinkers to become better citizens, and better citizens to become artists who can resist fascism.”

Also present was Jim Costanzo, the founder of the anti-capitalist Aaron Burr Society. He began by sounding his baritone horn—“an instrument of class warfare,” he said. Burr, he reminded everyone, was “the one who killed Hamilton, our first capitalist—however, we are nonviolent.” Bringing some historical perspective to the proceedings, he noted that “this is not the first time we’ve had racists, the KKK, corporatists, and fascists in the White House,” and proceeded to shout out Woodrow Wilson, Dick Cheney, and the Bushes. “We’re not going to normalize—we’re going to continue working harder than ever,” he said.

Lest anyone get too self-righteous about the proceedings, Kim Fraczek, the co-director of SANE Energy Project, pointed out that today’s event was taking place in, of all places, the Susan and John Hess Family Theater. “The Hess family made their fortune off of extracting oil and this industry has been built upon slavery, pollution, and destruction of our planet,” she said. Along with Occupy Museums, SANE had protested a Spectra gas pipeline that runs underneath the recently constructed Whitney, which she described as “highly explosive and radioactive.” The museum, for its part, has said that it is safe.

Also considering the politics of space were the three founding members of the Chinatown Art Brigade: Tomie Arai, ManSee Kong, and Betty Yu, who are involved with issues of gentrification and displacement in a neighborhood that art dealers have flocked to over the past decade. “We will not let this administration or anybody else divide us along lines of race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, or abilities,” Yu said in a potent address. “We stand united with our comrades in the immigrant rights, housing rights, women’s rights, LGBTQ, climate justice, labor rights, racial justice, and all other communities fighting white supremacy, hate, and injustice”—the audience interrupted her with applause.

At one point during the event, Avram Finkelstein of the AIDS-activist collective Gran Fury spoke movingly about the conception of the “Silence=Death” protest campaign that seared itself into the public imagination in the 1980s. “No political action is futile, ever,” he said, before identifying his main inspiration for taking the stage: the simple possibility that there could be a 16-year-old in the museum who might hear such a message and, who knows, put it into practice in years to come.

Copyright 2017, Art Media ARTNEWS, llc. 110 Greene Street, 2nd Fl., New York, N.Y. 10012. All rights reserved.