

IN THE SPRING OF 2017, ONLY WEEKS AWAY FROM the public re-opening of its large Sculpture Garden, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis slammed into a cultural conflict of historic proportions. The focal point, newly installed following the \$10 million renovation of the Sculpture Garden, was “Scaffold” by Sam Durant, a two-stories tall gallows evoking historic hangings.

The sculpture combined elements of scaffolds used in the executions of John Brown, Saddam Hussein and, most significantly, a group of 38 Dakota men in Mankato, near Minneapolis, in 1862. The provocative sculpture, already seen by wide audiences in Europe, carried a compassionate message about the horrors of oppression, yet became embroiled in a fast-moving protest that threatened to turn violent.

“We had not reached out to the Native community,” says Annie Gillette Cleveland, who was Chief of Marketing and Strategic Communications for the Walker Art Center at the time. What followed was what she termed “a perfect storm” of media, protests and lightning-fast developments that led ultimately to the work being ceremoniously dismantled and handed over to a group of Dakota leaders.

Ordered by President Abraham Lincoln, the Mankato hangings were the largest mass execution in the history of the US. “It’s a very, very deep open

Taken Down

ANNIE GILLETTE CLEVELAND, former Chief of Strategic Communications for Minneapolis’ Walker Art Center, talks to Brunswick’s **KIM MITCHELL** about a humbling conflict and its lessons for crisis preparedness.

wound for the Dakota community,” Ms. Gillette Cleveland says. “Many of the protesters can link their lineage back to people who were one of the 38.”

In addition, the Native American community already felt under-represented at the center. In the aftermath of “Scaffold,” one Native community leader told The New York Times, “The Walker’s track record of Native artists is pretty much nonexistent.”

As a globally recognized hub of both local culture and internationally acclaimed contemporary artwork, the Walker is watched by museum professionals everywhere. Managing its communications during the crisis, Ms. Gillette Cleveland felt the pressure.

“I think every museum across the world was reading about ‘Scaffold,’” she says. “This was everybody’s nightmare.”

The hanging of 38 Dakota in 1862 remains the largest mass execution in US history. The scene was captured in this illustration published by a French journal in 1863.

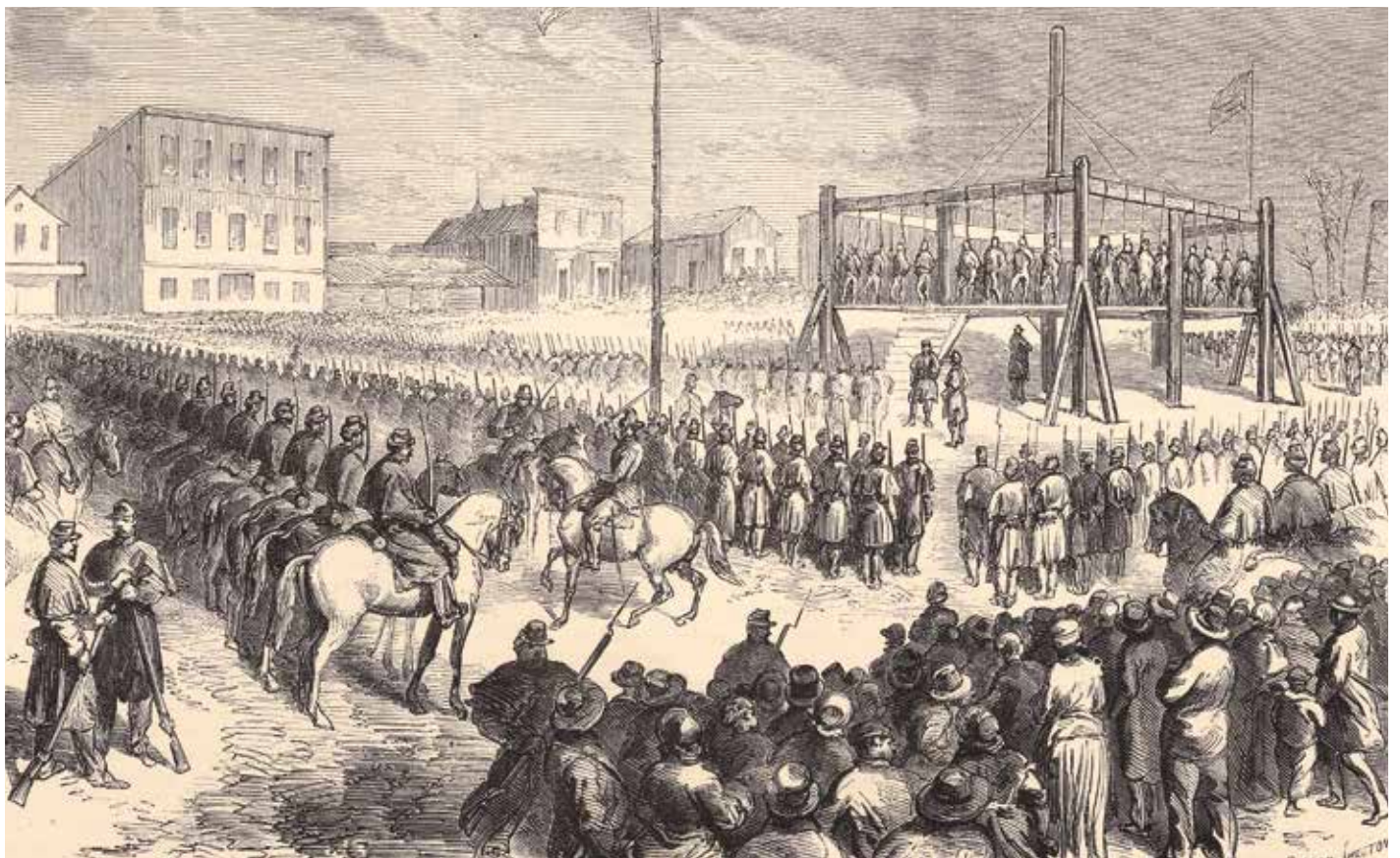


ILLUSTRATION: DEA/BIBLIOTECA AMBROSIANA/CONTRIBUTOR

What led to the dismantling of “Scaffold”?

We were scheduled to re-open the Sculpture Garden in June. The space is on Park Board land, which is also historically Dakota land – a private/public arrangement for this amazing space in the middle of Minneapolis. The garden held 60 sculptures – 18 of them were new. Meanwhile, we were running a museum with one of our biggest exhibitions ever, on Merce Cunningham. So we were very, very busy.

You could see the sculptures through the fencing. Sam Durant’s “Scaffold” was hard to miss. It had a prominent place at one of the Sculpture Garden entrances where school buses would soon park and kids would enter into the Sculpture Garden. It almost looked like a backyard playscape, but it was a gallows, and so, very ominous looking. Many of the staff were concerned about its scale and what it represented.

Our online managing editor – who writes content about the art world, about artists, about the Walker – did an interview with Sam. Before we published it, I found some language that I thought was problematic, so I sent it over to my sister at the Minnesota History Center. She’s done a lot of work with Native communities, specifically the Dakota. She immediately replied, “You don’t have a language problem, Annie. You have a sculpture problem.”

I quickly decided to take this looming issue to Olga Viso, the Executive Director. Soon after, we met with Native art world experts who said, “That sculpture has to come down or you will suffer irreparable consequences.” And that’s where it all started.

What did the artist intend with that work?

He wanted to open up these difficult histories around racial and criminal justice, to show that the US government had sanctioned these killings, allowed mass lynchings of people of color. He wanted it to be a learning space – but he now believes that he really miscalculated how it would be received.

No memorial has ever been built for this mass execution. So for Sam Durant, of California, to come and do it – on Dakota land – seemed to many to be inappropriate and insensitive. There are some sad and daunting statistics for the Native population here in Minnesota. And the staff were mortified that the Walker Art Center would add to what is already a tragic burden in their community. But that was the trajectory that emerged. From the Native perspective, it seemed like a prime example of how the white society does not understand or care about the Dakota people or their history.

One of the things Sam said was, “My work was created with the idea of creating a zone of discomfort for

whites. Your protests have now created a zone of discomfort for me.” He would say it took on a new, deeper meaning that speaks a lot to his original purpose.

Did the protests surprise others at the center?

You can never predict what a crisis is going to be. That’s what makes it a crisis. We were all planning for other scenarios, like we wouldn’t be able to open the gates on time because construction would be behind or maybe somebody could climb on one of the sculptures and fall off and hurt themselves. We were never expecting anything like this.

Seeing the crisis emerging, what did you do?

We asked a Native curator and Native art educator to advise us, and they both categorically said, “It has to come down.” From the standpoint of any curator, that isn’t really a solution. The artist should be free to say what they want, no matter how difficult, and it’s our job to interpret. So, at their suggestion, Olga wrote a letter of apology for not engaging the Native community prior to electing and placing this piece, and sent it to The Circle, a small indigenous newspaper. We knew we were striking the match on a pile of very dry tinder to start the crisis – we did that because it was coming anyway.

What tactics did you use once it hit the media?

A year prior to the opening of the Sculpture Garden, I brought in a crisis management and communications guru. My concern was we wouldn’t know how to handle communications to all of our stakeholders (Board, community, Park Board, members, et cetera) in an orderly, thoughtful manner if a crisis happened.

For a full day, we were trained on communications preparation with the PR team, the Board and entire leadership staff at the Walker – how to recognize when something is going to be a crisis, and what to do once it hits. With hundreds of thousands of people coming into the Garden, something was going to go wrong. It was the best decision I ever made.

Once Olga’s letter was posted on The Circle’s digital news site, we gathered that same trained team and hunkered down for the entire Memorial Day weekend. We basically lived in this one room, with Olga Viso, the Board President, the Vice President and the leadership team, including Operations, Development, Web, Education and Curatorial. Our social media person was on hand at all times. We had to be extremely tight in our communications, internal and external. We had to make sure that press releases, our online publishing, our social media, our email and so forth, were all coordinated.

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On Saturday, there were rumors that the protesters were going to burn it down at 3 p.m. And at 2 p.m., Sam, over the phone from California, agreed to let them have it. Neither Sam nor the Walker wanted anyone to be physically harmed or arrested. We notified the Dakota lead negotiator of Sam's decision and the threat was gone.

So you've got a threat of violence, a lot of moving parts, and you've got to make sure you get all of your messaging right, fast. It was really stressful.

The decision to let the sculpture go stopped the protesters from breaching the fence. But then immediately we had to figure out how to take it down. And that's when the real mediation with the Dakota began. A whole series of agreements took place in private negotiations on a Wednesday morning with cameras and reporters waiting outside the room. Our PR team didn't know what the agreements were going to be coming out of that room, but we had to be ready to share that with the media as live news.

It was a very sobering day for everybody. Sam had flown in. He was on camera with Olga. The Dakota leaders were there – it was incredibly emotional.

Moving the grand opening by a week meant notifying politicians, business leaders and out-of-town artists, and we had to communicate all that to the public. We had to plan for a public ceremonial take-down by the Dakota, which was extremely emotional and a last-minute event. And we were just hounded by the news all the time.

Protests outside the fenced area around the Walker Art Center's outdoor Sculpture Garden resulted in Sam Durant's large piece, "Scaffold," being given by the artist to the representatives of the local Dakota. A Native American construction company was hired to dismantle the artwork and a ceremony accompanied its removal. Mr. Durant handed over artistic rights to the Dakota, who vowed never to exhibit the work again.

KIM MITCHELL is a Partner with Brunswick Arts in New York and former Chief Communications Officer for The Museum of Modern Art in New York.

How effective do you think your actions were?

I don't know if I'm the one to say, because it's grading my own team. The response I've heard from the general public, our stakeholders and my museum peers is that given the situation, we handled our responsiveness and communication exceptionally well.

How was it working with the Dakota at that point?

The Dakota live all over Minnesota, the Dakotas, Montana, Canada. Because of their diaspora, there's no centralized governing body. We had just stuck ourselves in the middle of their history, which is fraught and difficult to understand. But that said, the Board and the leadership team opened the negotiation to include more Dakota leaders. They also selected a Dakota construction company to come take down the sculpture, with a Dakota-led ceremony.

What was the fallout internally?

The staff have had to put up with a lot of emotional turmoil, including Olga Viso's departure in November. They've had to defend the reputation of a place they love and adore. "Scaffold" is still discussed, but it's a very difficult topic for the staff. But fundamental learnings were inevitable. The Walker is a wiser art center because of this painful event.

What are the big communications lessons?

First, get crisis management communication training. That gave me the confidence to bring that group together and think through the question of "what do we do now?" We'd never been through this situation before, but we were more prepared and aligned. We had identified our key stakeholders a year in advance so we knew how and when to communicate to them.

The second thing is, support the leader. The Sculpture Garden renovation is really Olga's legacy. Give her your honest point of view, but support her as the leader. Whether we agreed with the sculpture or not, our team's job was to give her the ability to communicate her vision, her decisions.

Third, take care of the staff. Honest communication to and from staff is incredibly important. With all of the critical news from outside and heightened emotions within the Walker, our Board and leadership team made staff well-being a major priority.

Have others in the museum community contacted you about your experience?

I do get a couple calls here and there, like, "We think we have a crisis coming up and we would love your perspective." I obviously learned a lot through this experience. ♦