

Artist Statement, Sam Durant, 5/29/2017

Let me begin by describing the sculpture that has become the focus of protest in recent days as I envisioned it when it was first exhibited in 2012 in Europe at The Hague, Netherlands; Jupiter Artland, Edinburgh, Scotland; and dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany.

This wood and steel sculpture is a composite of the representations of seven historical gallows that were used in US state-sanctioned executions by hanging between 1859 and 2006. Of the seven gallows depicted in the work, one in particular recalls the design of the gallows of the execution of the Dakota 38 in Mankato, Minnesota in 1862. The Mankato Massacre represents the largest mass execution in the history of the United States, in which 38 Dakota men were executed by order of President Lincoln in the same week that the Emancipation Proclamation was signed. Six other scaffolds comprise the structure, which include those used to execute abolitionist John Brown (1859); the Lincoln Conspirators (1865), which included the first woman executed in US history; the Haymarket Martyrs (1886), which followed a labor uprising and bombing in Chicago; Rainey Bethea (1936), the last legally conducted public execution in US history; Billy Bailey (1996), the last execution by hanging (not public) in the US; and Saddam Hussein (2006), for war crimes at a joint Iraqi/US facility.

*Scaffold* opens the difficult histories of the racial dimension of the criminal justice system in the United States, ranging from lynchings to mass incarceration to capital punishment. In bringing these troubled and complex histories of national importance to the fore, it was my intention not to cause pain or suffering, but to speak against the continued marginalization of these stories and peoples, and to build awareness around their significance.

*Scaffold* seeks to address the contemporary relevance and resonance of these narratives today, especially at a time of continued institutionalized racism, and the ongoing dehumanization and intimidation of people of color. *Scaffold* is neither memorial nor monument, and stands against prevailing ideas and normative history. It warns against forgetting the past. In doing so, my hope for *Scaffold* is to offer a platform for open dialogue and exchange, a place to question not only our past, but the future we form together.

I made *Scaffold* as a learning space for people like me, white people who have not suffered the effects of a white supremacist society and who may not consciously know that it exists. It has been my belief that white artists need to address issues of white supremacy and its institutional manifestations. Whites created the concept of race and have used it to maintain dominance for centuries, whites must be involved in its dismantling. However, your protests have shown me that I made a grave miscalculation in how my work can be received by those in a particular community. In focusing on my position as a white artist making work for that audience I failed to

understand what the inclusion of the Dakota 38 in the sculpture could mean for Dakota people. I offer my deepest apologies for my thoughtlessness. I should have reached out to the Dakota community the moment I knew that the sculpture would be exhibited at the Walker Art Center in proximity to Mankato.

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. In my attempt to raise awareness I have learned something profound and I thank you for that. Can this be a learning experience for all of us, the Walker, other institutions and artists and larger society? I look forward to meeting the Dakota Elders on Wednesday in Minneapolis, and am open and ready to work together.