

Protest at Whitney Museum in New York calls for ouster of trustee who owns tear gas firm

By Sandy English
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On Sunday some 250 people protested inside the Whitney Museum of American Art, one of New York City's leading cultural institutions, and demanded the removal of Warren B. Kanders, the vice chairman of the museum's board of trustees.

Kanders is the chairman and founder of Safariland, a defense firm that produces the tear gas used in the unprovoked police-military attack on migrant workers at the US-Mexico border crossing in San Ysidro, south of San Diego, on November 25.

The protesters on Sunday, according to the *Art Newspaper*, held signs that read "Tear gas is deadly," "We will not be silent," "Greed kills" and "Dirty money." In addition, banners declared, "Warren Kanders Must Go!" and "No Space for Profiteers of State Violence."

The demonstration followed the issuing of an open letter signed by more than 100 Whitney staff demanding Kanders' resignation.

The relationship of Kanders to the firm was exposed at the end of last month by the contemporary art website *Hyperallergic*, which noted that photographs of spent tear gas canisters used against women and children at San Ysidro were clearly marked Safariland.

The staff's letter read, in part: "Many of us feel the violence inflicted upon the refugees—and against mostly-POC [people of color] protesters in Ferguson, and mostly-Indigenous protesters of the Dakota Access Pipeline, just two of many other instances of militarized tear gassing of unarmed citizens—much more personally than it seems to affect leadership. For many of us, the communities at the border, in Ferguson, in the Dakotas, are *our* communities. We read the *Hyperallergic* article and felt not annoyed, not

intellectually upset—we felt sick to our stomachs, we shed tears, we felt unsafe."

Kanders responded by disclaiming responsibility for the use of the products his company makes.

Whitney President Adam Weinberg issued a letter in defense of Kanders that evasively referred to "suffering in our city, the US and around the world: nationalism has risen to unimaginable heights; homelessness is rampant; refugee crises abound."

But Weinberg did not address the issue of Kanders's resignation and concluded by saying, "Even as we contend with often profound contradictions within our culture, we must live within the laws of society and observe the 'rules' of our Museum—mutual respect, tolerance and freedom of expression and, speaking personally, a commitment to kindness."

The response only increased the anger of the staff and helped build Sunday's protest.

Safariland's Defense Technology brand sells tear gas, pepper spray, bean bag rounds, batons, and a large line of various chemical agent grenades with names such as, "Riot-control continuous discharge grenade."

"Nonlethal" weapons such as these are meant to harm, frighten and intimidate groups of people in the US and on its border and in a whole range of countries whose governments are Safariland's customers. There are no innocent uses of these devices.

Forbes noted recently that Kanders "has made a fortune over the past three decades building a diversified network of defense equipment companies whose customers include the U.S. government as well as U.S. allies including Turkey, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Israel." The US Department of Homeland Security is also one of the firm's customers.

In the fiscal year that ended in 2017, Kanders' total compensation was \$2.3 million.

In his letter responding to the protests against his role at the Whitney, Kanders presented a blanket defense of the actions of his company, the police and military.

"I am the Chairman, CEO and owner of The Safariland Group," he wrote. "We are the largest global manufacturer of body armor for police officers, we provide safety holsters that prevent criminals from taking firearms from cops and we make the majority of the bomb suits worldwide worn by people who risk their lives to keep us safe. ...

"Regardless of one's political persuasion, I hope we can all agree that uncontrolled riots pose a serious threat not only to the safety and security of law enforcement, but also to the public in general. When faced with a chaotic situation, law enforcement officers have few options for crowd control, and non-lethal products (including 'tear gas') are on the list."

Kanders also offered a veiled threat against the protests, "I am proud that we have broadened the Whitney's role as the preeminent institution devoted to the art of the United States. While my company and the museum have distinct missions, both are important contributors to our society. This is why I believe that the politicization of every aspect of public life, including commercial organizations and cultural institutions, is not productive or healthy."

The brutality of the American state at the border on November 25 was shocking and disturbing to millions in the US and internationally. But extreme violence is the mode of US military and intelligence operations on a daily basis. The bombing and invasion of Syria by American troops and proxies, the supplying of weapons to the Saudi genocide in Yemen and assassinations in Afghanistan are business as usual for US imperialism. At home, police kill more than 1,000 people, white, black and immigrant, a year.

The presence of multimillionaire and billionaire magnates like Kanders on the boards of museums and other cultural institutions has now become the norm, as the financial aristocracy asserts itself in every field of cultural life. Such figures include BlackRock magnate and billionaire Laurence Fink, who sits on the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art, and war-criminal Henry Kissinger, Trustee Emeritus of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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