

A Community Response to ICA, Boston

Re: upcoming Dana Schutz exhibition

*We, a group of local artists, activists, and community members, are responding to the upcoming [Dana Schutz](#) exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (ICA) from July 26-November 26, 2017. Dana Schutz is a contemporary painter whose painting *Open Casket*, a depiction of Emmett Till's body, was [featured at the Whitney Biennial](#), which [sparked protest and outrage](#).*

When we heard about the ICA's upcoming exhibition, we shared our disappointment and concerns on our personal social media accounts. This prompted the ICA to reach out and invite us to discuss our concerns further. Within a few days in preparation for this meeting, we spoke with additional stakeholders and community members for broader insight, critique, and to hold ourselves accountable. We also consulted resources of protesters, critics, and supporters of the Whitney's Inclusion of "Open Casket." Many of these resources can be found at the bottom of this letter (page 6).

On July 20, nine of us met with the ICA and engaged in a three-hour discussion on the issues and implications of this exhibition on the Boston community, specifically on Black people and people of color. During the meeting, ICA curators cited [this dialogue from the Whitney](#) as a model response to create dialogue based on this artist. We voiced our concerns that as a cultural institution, the ICA has the responsibility to challenge dominant narratives, the appropriation of Black pain, and their role in history as institutions and individuals uplifting imagery with the potential to incite violence. The ICA was willing to engage us in conversation and open to hearing what we had to say. We recognize the importance of their reaching out and hosting this conversation. We left the meeting with many questions unanswered and with a promise from the ICA to continue this dialogue. We have taken them up on this promise and made our response public in the interest of transparency and accountability to the broader community.

Eva Respini, Barbara Lee Chief Curator
Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (ICA)
25 Harbor Shore Drive 02210

July 25, 2017

Dear Eva Respini and team:

We appreciate you calling us in on July 13 and meeting with us on June 20, weighing our concerns over Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (ICA) featuring artist Dana Schultz in a solo exhibition scheduled to start tomorrow, Wednesday July 26 for a duration of 18 weeks. **We want to acknowledge that such meetings are rare and require personal integrity and a tremendous dedication to the democratic principles of representation on the part of an institution's head staff. The power of the subsequent conversation is rooted in the vulnerability of being able to experience each others' unique personhoods as openly as we may allow ourselves to trust, complicated always by the mantles we carry.** We thank you for being present with us for three hours on such a beautiful evening in a place of work. In preparation for the July 20 meeting with you, we immediately began the process of collecting community responses. The group you met came together, many of us meeting for the first time in-person at the ICA itself. Since then, in the spirit of accountability, we have continued to gather input from community members. After deliberating over what you said on Thursday, we question whether this exhibition is appropriate or responsible in the context of the sacrifice of Black bodies that is still exerting

trauma on urban streets and in urban neighborhoods across the country. Today, some of us follow up with you. We recognize that you took notes; but we want to ensure that you are clear on the essential points that we shared with you on July 20.

Hearing what you have had to say so far, we do not feel that the ICA is making a responsible decision as an institution of art and culture. At this point we are unconvinced that ICA has the will to challenge the egregiousness of continued institutional backing of this type of violent artifact. People's humanity cannot be up for debate. We must challenge directors and curators of cultural institutions to face the moral gravitas of reckless cultural insensibilities of artists in their charge and not waver due to the weight of their bottomlines.

The lynching tradition that rages now is deeply rooted in the agricultural soil of the south, moving north with the Migration to which Mrs. Mamie Till Mobley, Emmett Till's mother, belonged, and which she understood. The Black press in the north was not subservient to the south, and Mrs. Till used the power in her hands and in her mind to defy the southern order that she hide the evidence of its usual transgressions. Mrs. Till chose to publish in Jet the true picture of the consolidated white hand of hatred.

- Dr. Barbara Lewis,
Trotter Institute for Black Studies

In "Open Casket" Dana Schutz paints over and erases the passion of a sorrowing, grieving mother, addressing the world with her truth.

We were hoping to hear the ICA resist the narrative that Black people can be sacrificed for the greater good. The exhibition going up as described at the meeting would continue the historical narrative that it is worth the suffering of communities most afflicted by continued state and culturally sanctioned racialized violence.

We were hoping to hear how the ICA had thought about how it would challenge the economic and cultural capital that benefits problematic artists. The exhibition going up as described at the meeting would continue and in fact capitalize on the notoriety of said painter, not only directly benefiting her access and future opportunities, but also the institution's. The people this is harming are of the very communities who are compelling this conversation. Meanwhile, the Till family's courage continues to be defiled.

While you spoke to cultural responsibility, we find the planned steps to address the painting to be lacking and in fact justifying the exhibition and thereby minimizing the implications of grave, cultural harm. We understand that the painting itself will not be shown and its exclusion is to be addressed as a wall label. We don't find this sufficient. Indeed, it is clear the institution stands to gain by virtue of its absence. Even though the painting will not be shown, even in its absence, backing its artist without accountability nor transparency about proceeds from the exhibition, the institution will be participating in condoning the coopting of Black pain and showing the art world and beyond that people can co-opt sacred imagery rooted in oppression and face little consequence, contributing to and perpetuating centuries-old racist iconography that ultimately justifies state and socially sanctioned violence on Black people.

Upon reviewing two hours of footage of the live-streamed Whitney Museum panel, which the ICA shared, we were alarmed by the apologist narratives from the Whitney representatives, justifying the painting's Biennial inclusion. We appreciate that the Whitney and the ICA support artistic freedom and stand by the right of an artist to portray what they choose. However, we cannot condone that the artist released her work to be exhibited, that curators chose to opportunistically exhibit it, and that the artist is getting continued coverage and cultural capital without accountability to her work.

Given that neither the Whitney, nor the artist, nor the ICA, have adequately answered any of the concerns raised and advocated for so passionately by Black artists and critics during the Whitney Biennial, this strategy of silence minimizes

the painting's cultural significance and of cultural institutions' responsibility to condemn racist iconography. Indeed, the ICA spinning such a narrative to engage damage control erases Black engagement with contemporary painting. Moreover, it normalizes that the desecration of cultural artifacts of marginalized communities, whose histories have been hidden and denied, is acceptable and exists as par-for-the-course with a trigger-ready denial of the unequal power dynamic that dates from the foundation of this so-called nation. We can only presume the accompanying wall tag will support this narrative of erasure. We make this supposition given the current language on the ICA's promotional materials describing the exhibition. Calling the work a "lightning rod," when it was an accident, should, in fact, be embarrassing for a hosting institution. Doing so shifts the narrative to center Dana Schutz as a cultural mover when it was Black artists and critics who struggled to bring about this conversation in the first place. The "lightning rod" terminology is also reminiscent of Woodrow Wilson as he endorsed the lynching film, *The Birth of a Nation*, in 1915, indicates a death-desiring legacy of whiteness against blackness that has been ignited, literally, in the demographic challenge that so many cities, including Boston, faces.

The ICA does not plan to publicly address institutional accountability until well into September when a [talk between curator Eva Respini and Boston's poet-laureate Danielle Legros-Georges](#) is to take place in order to "consider some of the challenges of organizing a show amidst artist controversy" giving the ICA an opportunity to legitimate the exhibition by avoiding addressing the painting at the opening.

The ICA also denied that the individual artist has responsibility. The painting's absence from the exhibition does not excuse the institution from engaging with the harm caused by the work by holding Dana Schutz accountable. You related that Dana will not be required to be physically present at her artist talk. To justify this you claimed that the artist does not have to talk, and quoting you, Eva, the artist's "broader artistic concerns go beyond this painting." This line of defense does not accede the power structure that compels such accountability. Lifting up the aesthetic contributions over the cultural implications of carelessly painting over one of most significant iconic images confronting the US' horrific and contemporary violence against people who were and continue to be compelled to build this nation actively contributes to the tactic to hide state violence in plain sight. This models celebrating the supposed innovative muting quality of Dana's take on abstract painting over the tangible state and culturally sanctioned trauma on the bodies of marginalized communities. The exhibition was thus discussed as if it were a train in motion and that it is inevitably going to proceed based on its aesthetic significance.

The ICA was skirting around acknowledging the cultural significance of the painting. No attempt was made to recognize how the painting, the artist and the institution that backs the artist tolerates and indeed enacts the narrative of the innocence of white femme perpetrators of anti-Black violence. The ICA could not accede that the white femme artist tampered with the intention of a grieving mother to humanely show in undeniable detail the brutality endured by her 14 year old adolescent child. This is in line with a long tradition of white supremacy obscuring and ultimately erasing narratives of the continued genocide of Black and indigenous peoples.

The ICA did not acknowledge how such culturally sanctioned violent iconography condones, offers impunity to, and escalates anti-Black and racialized violence. You told us that you look at your artists as a community you serve and are accountable to. This begins to immunize the artist from accountability by institutional sanction. It tries to equate the responsibility institutions have to a (tax-paying) public versus one to promote an artist to make mutually beneficial profit. It is a position that denies that the institution can enforce measures to have the artist be accountable. It chooses the artist over the communities the institution serves. Just as a bank would withdraw its credit when clients cannot keep to their original contract, a cultural institution has more power than the ICA is willing to concede. This denial of power and subsequent impunity from accountability sets a dangerous precedent in our contemporary world - one that continues in the tradition of applying cultural power to protect offending white femmes who perpetrate violence against Black communities. In protecting the artist's potential development of racial sensitivity, you allow a treacherous painting to go unchecked - one that contributes to painting over and muting a tremendous act of defiance that mobilized the civil rights movement - a movement that continues to this day. This left us thinking whatever small chance the ICA had to skillfully hold space for

both the community and the art being shown would not be possible as they are not willing to concede the power and responsibility they carry.

Several comments made felt disingenuous. When asked if you, Eva, knew of the Michael Jackson painting (2005) prior to inviting the artist two years ago (one fantasizing the autopsy of the iconic Black celebrity before he passed), you responded that you did not see the painting in person so you could not comment on it. You must have been aware of its existence as you took great pride in establishing that you've been cultivating your connection with Dana Schutz for 15 years. By your response, you chose to lift up the aesthetic quality of the paintings over questionable, culturally-irresponsible content, and what now might be understood as a fixation and leering objectification of iconic Black male disfigurement and ultimately death. At the Whitney Biennial, artist Parker Bright's action felt as if he was protecting the spirit of Emmett Till by preventing viewers from engaging in just this type of voyeurism by standing guard in front of the painting and by naming it, wearing a t-shirt upon which he had written "BLACK DEATH SPECTACLE."

All this affirmed our concerns entering the meeting with you. Therefore, some of us struggled to vocalize that we would like to see the show pulled at the meeting, recognizing that we are still in the process of securing proper accountability to our communities and that the ICA itself does excellent programming for communities and artists alike who negotiate marginalized identities.

How then do we keep the ICA accountable to its own strategic plan for radical welcome just announced earlier this year?

As we are still immersed in conversations with our communities, we are listing our working demands here. After more discussions with artists and organizers in Boston's Black and diverse communities, we may revise our list:

- 1. Answer the questions posed by protesters, starting with those asked by NYU Professor Lyle Ashton Harris at the Whitney panel.**

"What is the artist's role in confronting or contributing to social and cultural amnesia?"

How do we effectively intervene in the continual re-traumatization - that is - re-traumatization of Black bodies and bodies of color, given the horrific political climate in which we find ourselves ?

How do we cultivate a sphere of pleasure and joy that provide sustenance and strength while engaging in a beautiful resistance? - to quote Ta-Nehisi Coates"

- 2. The ICA should acknowledge publicly and in the text of the exhibition that a white femme artist tampered with the intention of a grieving Black mother to humanely show in undeniable detail the brutality endured by her 14 year old adolescent child - that this is in line with a long tradition of white supremacy obscuring and ultimately erasing narratives of the continued genocide of Black and indigenous peoples.**

- 3. Host an on-site panel designed with input by Dr. Barbara Lewis, director of the William Monroe Trotter Institute for the Study of Black History and Culture at UMass Boston, with Dana Schutz and Eva Respini present and available for the duration of panel and after for Q&A from the public.**

This is to be a moderated conversation with the artist and curator present, with the intention of having an accountable community dialogue. We know that the ICA intends to host at least one community dialogue with the theme of "who speaks for whom". While this conversation is worthwhile, it does not address the specific concerns of responsibility of this artist and the institution's power and connection to the historical trend of iconographic anti-Black violence.

4. Revisit and respond to Hannah Black's gracious, conciliatory, even forgiving open letter, with her last paragraph a call to decency:

"The curators of the Whitney biennial surely agree, because they have staged a show in which Black life and anti-Black violence feature as themes, and been approvingly reviewed in major publications for doing so. Although it is possible that this inclusion means no more than that blackness is hot right now, driven into non-Black consciousness by prominent Black uprisings and struggles across the US and elsewhere, I choose to assume as much capacity for insight and sincerity in the biennial curators as I do in myself. Which is to say — we all make terrible mistakes sometimes, but through effort the more important thing could be how we move to make amends for them and what we learn in the process. The painting must go."

Please pull the show. This is not about censorship. This is about institutional accountability, as the institutions working with the artist are even now not acknowledging that this nation is not an even playing field. During this violent climate, to show true accountability, we need institutions to go bold. We need them to move from side panels to action. We need them to channel the courage of the editors of *Jet Magazine* in publishing the photos on September 15, 1955, as Mrs. Mamey Till Mobley asked of them. We need them to go bold and not back down from fear of losing funders and enraging the fury of the current executive administration against arts funding. When institutions take action, they allow other institutions to take action. You are not alone. The people will stand with you.

Please know that we will continue to organize around this regardless of the decisions the ICA makes. Knowing the significance of the question of who gets to tell whose story and make it canonical and why, we have endeavored, since we met with you, and will continue to endeavor to collect deep and wide community response so that our efforts might have real impact. We will be calling for white and non-black artists, culture workers, and community members to join with the Black community, broadly defined to include African heritage and African diasporic people, to continue the struggle for the economic and cultural responsibility of all democratic institutions, particularly during such moments of community grievance.

Mrs. Mamie Till Mobley will not be scourged; nor will the generations of now, yesterday and tomorrow stand silent as an agenda of extermination, erasure, and elimination finds refuge and support in the halls of privilege.

Thank you for your time and attention,

Megan Smith, contributing writer
Allison Disher, contributing writer
Stephanie Houten, contributing writer
Pampi, writer
Vonds DuBuisson

Community members we are organizing with who were not present at July 20 meeting:

Dr. Barbara Lewis, contributing writer
Christlene DeJean, contributing writer
Mallory Hanora, contributing writer

Resources and citations on Dana Schutz's "Open Casket"

1. [Perspectives on Race and Representation: An Evening With the Racial Imaginary Institute](#). Whitney Museum of American Art. Posted April 11, 2017.
2. [ICA Exhibitions: Dana Schutz](#). Institute of Contemporary Art.
3. [Protesters Block, Demand Removal of a Painting of Emmett Till at the Whitney Biennial](#). Hyperallergic. Posted March 22, 2017.
4. [Artists and Critics Demand Whitney Biennial Remove Painting in Open Letter](#). Artforum. Posted March 21, 2017.
5. [#MuseumsSoWhite: Black Pain and Why Painting Emmett Till Matters](#). NBC News. Posted March 26, 2017.
6. ['The Painting Must Go': Hannah Black Pens Open Letter to the Whitney About Controversial Biennial Work](#). Artnews. Published March 21, 2017.
7. [Black Bodies, White Cubes: The Problem With Contemporary Art's Appropriation of Race](#). Artnews. Published July 11, 2017.
8. [The Case Against Dana Schutz](#). New Republic. Published March 22, 2017.
9. [Dana Schutz Responds to the Uproar Over Her Emmett Till Painting at the Whitney Biennial](#). Artnet News. Published March 23, 2017.
10. [Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go: On Dana Schutz's Image of Emmett Till](#). Hyperallergic. Published March 27, 2017.
11. ["What Does It Mean to Be Black and Look at This?" A Scholar Reflects on the Dana Schutz Controversy](#). Hyperallergic. Published March 24, 2017.
12. ["Can you be BLACK and Look at This?": Reading the Rodney King Video\(s\)](#). Illinois State Online. Original Document Published 1994.
13. [Black Motherhood and the Limits of Empathy](#). The Weekly Challenger. Published July 20, 2017.
14. *THE TRAUMA OF THE ROUTINE: LESSONS ON CULTURAL TRAUMA FROM THE EMMETT TILL VERDICT*. American Sociological Association. Published December 17, 2016.