

# Contemporary Art and “Discomfort” Among Millennials

## An Academic Museum Case Study

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As an art museum located on a college campus, whose main audience is students, we face unique questions. How do we navigate the sometimes passionate, diverse, and divergent reactions of college students—often lumped into the term “millennials”—to art that intentionally provokes uncomfortable viewpoints?<sup>1</sup> After all, as recently noted in numerous publications (including a lengthy *New Yorker* article about current campus politics at Oberlin College), students are increasingly demanding everything from trigger

1 The term “millennials” has been used rather broadly to refer to students born between roughly the early 1980s to the mid-1990s or early 2000s, depending on the source consulted. Current college students still fall into this generational category.

warnings to “safe spaces” to shield them from exactly what contemporary art does.<sup>2</sup>

This article focuses on an interdisciplinary installation produced by artist-in-residence Cheryl Pope for the Graham Gund Gallery at Kenyon College, Ohio. Pope was invited by the museum, in collaboration with Kenyon’s athletic director and two social science professors, to undertake a project that culminated in an art installation in the Kenyon Athletic Center (KAC) (fig. 1). The installation, “Community is Built on Empathy”—

2 Nathan Heller, “The Big Uneasy,” *New Yorker*, May 30, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/30/the-new-activism-of-liberal-arts-colleges>, accessed August 26, 2016.



fig. 1. Installation view of Pope’s banners hanging around the periphery of the MAC court in the Kenyon Athletic Center.

comprised of a series of championship banners that spelled out anonymous, student-written statements of personal identity—provoked a series of complicated reactions from student-athletes and select coaches when unveiled (figs. 2 & 3).<sup>3</sup> The Gund Gallery purposefully involved students, faculty, administrators, and a range of other community members in the participatory and coauthored creation and reception of this art installation in a nontraditional venue in order to more powerfully elicit open discussion about difficult topics like race, class, gender, and other issues.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary art is often intended to be uncomfortable; to challenge and question. Emotional, psychological, and cognitive responses to art can be, as expected and intended, further heightened when confronted in nontraditional exhibition sites and contexts. When combined with thoughtful exhibition design, didactics, and programming, though, it can be effective in raising social and personal awareness in unexpected ways.

### Developing Relationships

After the Gund Gallery opened in 2011, Kenyon's athletic director, Peter Smith, invited me to consider presenting art in the KAC because he values interdisciplinary development in his student-athletes. It was a somewhat surprising and very daunting invitation, given that few academic museums are invited to curate exhibitions in athletic centers on their campuses, and that the KAC is a high-profile venue:<sup>5</sup> the 263,000-square-

foot, award-winning center is among the many structures across campus (including our museum) designed by noted architect, art collector, philanthropist, and alum Graham Gund '63.

In response, in 2015 I contacted Cheryl Pope, a visual artist working in sculpture, installation, and performance—and a full-time professor in the Fashion, Body and Garment and Contemporary Practices programs at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago—about the possibility of a short-term residency during which she might produce new work for the KAC. Pope's work explores issues of identity in provocative ways and reflects an ongoing interest in varsity athletic aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> At an earlier residency at Lindblom Math and Science Academy on the south side of Chicago, for example, she brought together at-risk, inner-city students to explore their private self-perceptions and anxieties. In that project, Pope took short phrases from the students' writings and translated them into classic championship banners, which she installed around the school's gymnasium. The phrases on the banners included statements such as "I am quiet" or "I am that one girl with no future." I asked her to consider replicating this project in our highly selective liberal arts college setting, and shared photographs of the Lindblom project with the enthusiastic athletic director. He, in turn, distributed the images to his staff to ensure they knew what Pope was setting out to produce and to encourage their support and participation.

It is not unusual for an artist to undertake a commission for public art in an athletic (or any other kind of building) on a college campus. However, it is very rare to find an artist like Pope who is interested specifically in responding to an athletic space and to the community of people who use it. We were drawn to her desire to deploy a nontraditional venue's function, cultural position, and architecture as a conceptual element rather than simply a challenge to be overcome.

6 For more on Pope and her work, see [www.cherylpope.net](http://www.cherylpope.net).

3 Examples of the banners' statements: "I cannot ignore that I am white" and "I am scared of failing."

4 This project's intentions clearly reflect our museum's mission: "The Gund Gallery celebrates the power of art as a critical centerpiece of Kenyon's liberal arts mission and our community. We champion the best art and artists of the 20th and 21st centuries via an active exhibition schedule, expanding permanent collection, and formal and informal learning experiences."

5 The 10-year-old, award-winning Kenyon Athletic Center has been cited multiple times by the *Princeton Review* as the best college athletic facility in the country. The Gund Gallery, named for Graham Gund, has also been cited for its architecture. Few academic museums are invited to curate exhibitions in athletic centers on their campuses.

I  
CANNOT  
IGNORE  
THAT  
I  
AM  
WHITE

**HOME  
IS  
NOT  
MY  
HOME**

fig. 3. Individual banner.

Pope was also asked to work with an undergraduate humanities, social or natural science course and professor through a Mellon Foundation supported “artist embed” residency program requiring direct and sustained in-class engagement with students and teachers.<sup>7</sup> During her spring 2016 residency, Pope worked closely with the professors and students of two social science courses. The first, “Institutions and Inequalities,” introduces students to theories, perspectives, concepts, and methods used in sociology. The goal of the course is to provide an understanding of our social life, including people, institutions, groups, cultures, and interactions. This is accomplished by exploring the way individuals’ lives are shaped and influenced by past and present social, cultural, and economic developments, and the processes that influence social cohesion and social change.<sup>8</sup> One hundred forty-three anonymous, personal written statements were inspired by multiple class discussions, readings, and interactions between each other, the artist, and professor.<sup>9</sup> Many of the statements making up this “data set” were self-reflections—honest and personal realizations, fears, and admissions—that emerged from course readings, including Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2011) and Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010).

The product of this collaboration directly fed into the second course: “Introduction to Research Methods in Psychology,” which features hands-on generation and application of psychological research, analytical thinking and writing, the development of personal research interests, and quantitative reasoning and graphical interpretation. In a peer-to-peer learning mode, each psychology

student created a unique, research-based coding system to analyze the data set developed by the sociology class.<sup>10</sup> Students were required to analyze the data set using a body of literature acquired earlier in the semester—and scholarship sought as they developed hypotheses—to gain a better understanding of why fellow students articulated the realizations, fears, and admissions in their statements. They presented their findings in the form of science posters.

### Building Community

The artist and a small (self-selecting) group of sociology students chose 20 of the 143 personal statements. The choices were based on how they reflected important meaningful reactions to readings and class discussions—responses that might impact other students and KAC users and fulfill the implied goal (and title) of the work, “Community is Built on Empathy.” The artist then contracted a trophy and banner company to professionally sew the colorful championship banners. The finished banners were hung in the KAC around the Multi-Activity Court (MAC), a centrally-located, intramural gym open to—and used by—students, faculty, staff, and community members. Gund staff wrote exhibition signage that described the artist’s intentions and collaborative process. The signage was then produced and installed as semi-transparent decals in a central position on the protective glass wall surrounding the court, a prominent location that ensured maximum readability for KAC users and guests (fig. 4). The psychology professor chose eight of the most successful science posters to be printed as decals, and installed them to the immediate left and right of the centrally positioned signage decal. The entire signage plan provided multiple layers of context and interpretation for viewers. Shortly after opening the April 26 to December 31, 2016 installation, Gund staff added a touchscreen-tablet

7 Cheryl Pope’s residency has been made possible through a generous multiyear seed grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, with matching support from the Gund Gallery Board of Directors.

8 Taught by Visiting Professor of Sociology David Skubby.

9 Anonymity was vital and required to ensure ethical research practices were followed. Student writings took many forms and formats—from declarative phrases to journal-like entries—which required that the artist edit and cull the writing into statements of similar lengths.

10 Taught by Visiting Professor of Psychology Patrick Ewell.

fig. 4. View of signage wall, including semitransparent signage decals.

kiosk to encourage audience members to blog responses to the installation.<sup>11</sup>

By foregrounding and championing hidden anxieties as core aspects of identity in a very public place via a traditionally triumphant cultural symbol—the championship banner—the artist did two things that focused on both the collective and the individual. She invited viewers to build community by encouraging increased collective empathy in a physical space that normally demands competitive denials of weakness and self-doubt at the team or group level. Perhaps most problematically, she also asked KAC users to look at the banners—traditional signifiers of bravado, success, and dominance—and acknowledge their own deepest, individual insecurities in a place where such feelings are rarely brooked. Likewise, students in the collaborating sociology and psychology classes participated at both the individual and group levels.

### Reactions, Context, and Expectations

The installation garnered a range of reactions. For the social science students, the experience of working with the resident artist was positive, meaningful, and uniquely aligned with the content of their courses. Faculty members, administrators, trustees, and others found the project to be very meaningful, responsible, and positive. The responses from some who use the gym on a regular basis were quite different.

Several coaches embraced the banners and their intent, using them as coaching tools and the foundation for open discussions with student-athletes about their fears and anxieties as athletes, but also as students and developing young adults. Approximately one week after the April 2016 installation of the banners, though, one of the teams sent a letter to athletic director Peter Smith

11 The idea for the kiosk came out of conversations with the athletic director and was intended to provide a way for people to document responses to the installation. Unfortunately, few people used it.

requesting that at least one “offensive banner” with the phrase “I cannot ignore that I am white” be removed.<sup>12</sup> In conversations with athletic director Peter Smith, he cited how the students felt that the banners constituted a form of social demonstration, and that they were confused about the purpose or intention, despite the didactic signage and several open public forums and talks featuring the artist. College finals and the summer break interfered with any substantial follow-up, but in the weeks and months that followed, Gund staff initiated a series of conversations between and among the athletic director, museum director, artist, professors, coaches, and college administration. Early reactions by the team and some coaching staff to the controversial banner seemed to revolve around critical and nuanced distinctions between racial, as opposed to racist, statements. This key issue has been central to valuable conversations among constituents who had been invited on multiple occasions to speak with the artist throughout the residency and after.

The summer provided space for reflection, particularly on a recurring word used throughout all the conversations around this project: *context*. When the context of a contemporary art installation moves from the white cube of a museum to an intramural basketball court, audience expectations are altered. According to a recent national study, the top three reasons people go to art museums are:

- 1) to gain knowledge (64.6 percent);
- 2) to see high-quality art (55.5 percent); and
- 3) because it is emotionally rewarding (54.4 percent).<sup>13</sup>

12 The one-page, unpublished letter was dated May 9, 2016, and was addressed and submitted to Peter Smith, Kenyon College Athletic Director. It was signed by the members of the team. Although both Smith and the artist shared the letter with me, I have here cited only from my personal notes taken during numerous conversations between and among the three of us from May to September, 2016.

13 Francie Ostrower, “Multiple Motives, Multiple Experiences: The Diversity of Cultural Participation,” in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America’s Cultural Life*, eds. Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey (New York: Routledge, 2008), 90. The national study was commissioned by the Wallace Foundation and conducted by the Urban Institute in 2004.



While art museum audiences expect both to gain knowledge and have an emotional experience, users of athletic centers are more prepared for physically- and socially-oriented experiences. In their letter to the athletic director, football players articulated in multiple ways that they were disturbed by the banners' lack of "context" which resulted in their feelings of discomfort in a space where they spend a lot of time.<sup>14</sup> Students and some coaching staff were disrupted by an art project that seemed so "out of place" and which powerfully changed their daily patterns and perceptions.

Ted Mason, Kenyon's Associate Provost for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Professor of English, pointed out that context is central to the issue of trigger warnings and safe spaces. These protective devices tend to paint with a broad brush something which is far more complicated.<sup>15</sup> Trigger warnings are meant to prepare individuals for possible psychological effects associated with a diagnosis of an individual's real psychological problem, especially recurrent trauma tied to a life event. In an academic context, trigger warnings may take the form of warnings in a syllabus. For

example, an English class syllabus might include a statement disclosing the use of racist language in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

In Mason's opinion, such warnings are meant to extend this diagnosis into circumstances (i.e. contexts) where they are not necessarily appropriate, expecting individual responses that are often not predictable. "Expressive cultural work that is intended to create reactions that might not be comfortable," noted Mason, "should not be closed to interpretation by 'emotional spoilers.'" College and museum administrators, the artist, collaborating professors, and the athletic director widely agreed that no banners should be removed and that negative responses probably exposed sensitivities among members of our community where careful discussions about race and identity could be beneficial. Despite early concerns about the team's letter and pressure from some coaching staff, athletic director Peter Smith firmly believes the collaboration was healthy, and that it set a course for many important conversations among his own constituents. He strongly supports future collaborations between the museum and the athletic program for this reason.

In response to the 1961 University of California's decision to allow an alleged communist to speak at Berkeley, Chancellor Clark Kerr famously and

14 Despite this perception, the KAC is free and open to all students, staff, and community members, and is widely used by all.

15 Ted Mason (Kenyon's Associate Provost for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Professor of English), in discussion with the author, August 8, 2016.



definitively stated: “The university is not engaged in making ideas safe for students. It is engaged in making students safe for ideas.” Fifty-five years later, amid current calls by college students and others for trigger warnings and safe spaces, Kerr’s principled dictum was recently reinforced by the University of Chicago in a letter to newly admitted students: “Members of our community are encouraged to speak, write, listen, challenge and learn, without fear of censorship.... You will find that we expect members of our community to be engaged in rigorous debate, discussion, and even disagreement. At times this may challenge you and even cause discomfort.”<sup>16</sup> Further, he wrote,

Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called ‘trigger warnings,’ we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual “safe spaces” where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.<sup>17</sup>

The University of Chicago’s response is welcomed by academics and university museum professionals for whom the long-held value of cognitive dissonance is an important tool for the transformational classroom, museum gallery, and even academic-based athletic court.<sup>18</sup> As authors Phaedra Livingstone, Jill Hartz, and Barbara Rothermel argue in a recent article about controversy and art in university museum exhibitions, “Rather than self-censoring in fear of being questioned...academic museums can choose to act as forums for debate about difficult topics and processes to navigate them.”<sup>19</sup>

16 Leonor Vivanco and Dawn Rhodes, “U. of C. tells incoming freshmen it does not support ‘trigger warnings’ or ‘safe spaces,’” *Chicago Tribune*, August 26, 2016, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-university-of-chicago-safe-spaces-letter-met-20160825-story.html> (accessed August 26, 2016).

17 Letter reproduced in Leonor Vivanco and Dawn Rhodes, “U. of C. tells incoming freshmen it does not support ‘trigger warnings’ or ‘safe spaces,’” *Chicago Tribune*.

18 Phaedra Livingstone, Jill Hartz, and Barbara Rothermel, “A formidable forum: University museums embrace controversy,” *University Museums and Collections Journal*, vol. 8 (2016), 26, <http://publicus.culture.hu-berlin.de/umac/pdf/UMACJ-8.pdf> (accessed July 8, 2016).

19 Ibid.

In our collaboration with Cheryl Pope, we were able to create such an intellectual forum. A unique web of collaborations—college student participation and artistic co-creation, interdisciplinary faculty engagement, athletic administration openness, and museum flexibility—evoked diverse emotional and intellectual responses. These responses linked the formal learning in classrooms to informal learning among student groups and our own faculty and staff colleagues. By shifting the contexts of production and interpretation of art in ways that disrupted audience expectations, we forced dialogue about controversial and timely social issues that might not otherwise have taken place. As venues in which audiences expect emotionally and intellectually challenging experiences, contemporary art museums are well prepared to deal with difficult subjects that are often central to the work of many living artists. A museum’s role can be strategically amplified when we move beyond gallery walls, change contexts, and disrupt audience expectations. Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised. Artists have known this for years, and that is precisely why they take their art into public spaces. ■

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