EXPRESSION AND REPRESSION: CONTEMPORARY ART CENSORSHIP IN AMERICA

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Introduction

The censorship of art has been as constant as its production. I define censorship as the directed removal, erasure, covering, or otherwise suppressing of an image, object, or person on the grounds of political, social, moral, or cultural practices and/or beliefs. There have been very few periods or societies completely free of visual censorship, as this action against images can be traced back to Ancient Egypt.¹ While many individual censorship cases become known for the controversy they create, it is not often that we think of censorship as a continuous phenomena. Rather, we tend to view art censorship either as case-by-case events or as especially intense periods of image suppression, including the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Europe during the 1500s and 1600s, Nazi-era in Germany in the 1930s and 40s, and more recently, the culture wars in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. As we will see, censorship, and the will to regulate art, goes hand-in-hand with artistic production, and it ebbs and flows in response to social, political, and cultural changes.

In the thesis exhibition I curated, *Expression and Repression: Contemporary Art Censorship in America*, I discussed the experiences of four contemporary artists, Sue Coe, David Wojnarowicz, Kara Walker, and John Sims, with art-making and censorship. This exhibition at the Kennedy Museum of Art in Athens, Ohio (October 27 - December December 17, 2017) was the primary part of my creative thesis project and served to acknowledge how these artists confronted social issues and conditions that had continually aided in the silencing of marginalized groups and communities. These artists used art as a platform to call attention to issues including sexism, racism, homophobia, and forms of discrimination or suppression. In the

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exhibition I described how, in response to artistic efforts to sensitize people to such issues, institutions of power, such as the government, arts organizations, and other outspoken groups, attempted to repress such “outbursts” and maintain or gain control, by censoring these artists.

In this catalogue, I examine in-depth how these contemporary artists have used subversive or symbolic visual expression as a way of communicating social and identity issues. By making provocative works with charged subject matter that compel viewers to question and reflect on their own beliefs, these artists have contributed to giving visibility to marginalized communities and/or challenging social conditions. Their efforts have added to ongoing conversations about topics that they address and more broadly, the power structures that have defined and repressed these issues. I argue that both their artistic productions and the pushback that they received reflected the changing cultural norms of the United States that had begun with the social movements of the 1960s and catalyzed the debates of the culture wars.

In this exhibition catalogue I will situate their experiences in relation to the culture wars. It may be justifiable to call any period that I have mentioned where there is heightened anxiety over images part of a specific culture war. This is because these periods often occur when significant tension between two or more ideologically different social, political, or cultural groups exists. Here, the culture wars are limited to the United States in years between the late 1980s and early 1990s. I define the culture wars as a manifestation of deep and widespread cultural division that had been growing more visible since the 1960s. Andrew Hartman describes that this division was between a traditional, “Normative America” and an emerging New Left, the marginalized groups of women, persons of color and LGBT individuals, who were fighting to
have a voice.\(^2\) Like I have noted above, the culture wars are known as a difficult period for artists. While this is true, in this catalogue I will also be discussing artists whose experiences with censorship fall outside of this defined period. I argue that, while the culture wars have certainly ended, they, as a sign of social change, are significant for understanding and responding to the repression experienced by these and other artists working within roughly the last thirty years in the United States.

By exploring the censorship of these artists in a relatively chronological order, I intend to build an understanding of both how the culture wars developed and how censorship has changed because of the culture wars. After discussing the cultural climate leading up to the wars, I will begin by describing British-American artist Sue Coe’s experience with censorship when she submitted “New Bedford Rape” to the *Boston Magazine* in 1984 and her efforts to make people witnesses to abuses of power. Although it takes place some years before the defined culture wars, it will serve as a point for understanding how censorship has often operated without much publicity prior to the culture wars. I will then examine David Wojnarowicz’s experience with the censorship at the peak of the culture wars, as well as an incident in 2010, in which the late artist was subjected to a kind of resurgence of those wars at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. I follow this with Kara Walker’s experience as an emerging artist questioned by individuals and institutions from within the artistic community in the years following the culture wars for her subversive works that use racial stereotypes to confront racism. As well, I will mention how the potential for her work to promote dialogue was used to defend it in a recent case of censorship. Finally, I will examine John Sims’ experience in the 2000s with

\(^2\) Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 5. Andrew Hartman defines normative America as “an analytical category...used to refer to an inchoate group of assumptions and aspirations shared by millions of Americans during the post war years.”
Neo-Confederate groups when he planned to install *The Proper Way to Hang a Confederate Flag* outdoors, and how he reclaimed control over his work when it moved. In studying these cases individually, I can both discuss the unique approaches used and issues addressed by the artists in their work, as well as demonstrate the nuances of censorship and diversity of censors. Through this study, we can come to a conclusion about how the cultural changes throughout the decades of the late twentieth century impacted both the artistic production and censorship of art, as well as what current support for artists confronting controversial issues looks like today.

I will draw on primary resources, including interviews, newspaper articles, and statements made by the artists, institutions involved, and censors to gain insight into the contexts of these artists’ censorship experiences and practices. In addition, art theory, image theory, censorship theory, history and art history will offer significant frameworks for developing an idea about the how the artists, their work, and their experiences with censorship reflect the trajectory of the United States’ artistic environment within the last thirty years. The secondary sources framing my exhibition within the discipline of art history regard image theory and freedom of expression within the context of the United States, both of which are significant to understanding why the exhibited artists use controversial subject matter or symbols in their work and why such work has been so frequently or fervently contested.

I first look at the significance that images can have in evoking psychological reactions among viewers, for the purpose of understanding how the exhibited artists’ work is valued as giving visibility and therefore power to certain communities. David Freedberg’s book, *The Power of Images*, explores the relationship that images have, in all different contexts, with their viewers. He discusses how the fact that images have been repressed, both physically and
psychologically by viewers and scholars, has made it possible for us to acknowledge the power that they have. He writes, “Once our eyes are arrested by an image…we can no longer resist the engagement of emotion and feeling.” This literary work provides a framework for understanding how the artists use certain subject matter to engage their audience, and how diverse, and sometimes conflicting perceptions of their work arise.

While Freedberg’s book provides a general argument for the emotional influence of images on people, Amy Adler’s article, “What’s Left? Hate Speech, Pornography, and the Problem for Artistic Expression,” helps us place this kind of response to the visual within the period most relevant to my argument. The article details the problem of trying to censor hate speech and pornography while also allowing for expression that might use offensive imagery or language to criticize or subvert such topics. She also analyzes how artists, particularly outsider artists, utilize subversive artistic communication to pursue equality for marginalized communities. Adler argues that, “Because of the indeterminate nature of language itself--the way in which, for example, well-intentioned activist speech and oppressive hate speech can have similar effects--there is no possibility of devising a system of leftist political censorship that could protect the subversive, activist use of hate speech and pornography.” She argues that the only way to resolve this is to either allow for all activist speech or enlist a system of censorship that applies to all forms of expression. It is through this understanding of freedom of expression that I determine how the exhibited artists utilize charged subject matter to, in turn, contribute to

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critical dialogue about certain social conditions and marginalized communities, and discuss the implications of their work within the United States.

**Defining the Culture Wars**

The pervasiveness of art censorship throughout different histories and in the United States, makes it vital to this discussion that I describe why the culture wars are restricted to the 1980s and 1990s. Though censorship was a known, if not somewhat regular occurrence in the United States prior to the culture wars, we must investigate why the culture wars stand out in censorship history and how it became such a charged period for artists. This uniqueness will also attest to its effects on American society, and in this study, its reverberations in the art world.

Of course, as I have noted above, art censorship has been persistent in the United States. Jane Clapp’s book *Art Censorship*, an index of art censorship up until 1972, is an apt tool for accounting for many records of such cases in the United States, and recognizing the regularity of censorship throughout time and space. According to Clapp, “The examples of censored art describe, as a record, not an evaluation, typical, significant, interesting, or well-known incidents in the positive and negative controls of art.”\(^5\) Her book describes specific instances of censorship and the contextual circumstances in which they took place. From her book we can gather that censorship has not been unknown to the United States, even in its first decades of nationhood. Coming into the twentieth century in the United States, she remarks upon how such events as the rise of film and the Cold War inspired regulations of images during those times. The recurrence and regularity of censoring images throughout the history of the United States makes it possible for us to gauge why censorship during culture wars are so notable.

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\(^5\) Jane Clapp, *Art Censorship*, v.
While censorship has existed throughout time, the historical circumstances that have influenced cultural regulation and general anxiety over images, like political events or social movements, are significant to look at in the case of the culture wars. Cultural shifts and division within the United States between the 1980s and early 2000s, the time period in which the exhibited artworks were produced, largely have been continuations from ongoing social movements since the 1960s. According to Andrew Hartman’s book, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, widespread social inequities were revealed within the United States after World War II and thus informed “the radical political mobilizations of the sixties – civil rights, Black and Chicano Power, feminism, gay liberation, the antiwar movement, and the legal push for secularization.” These early efforts for greater visibility and equality have largely informed the work that the exhibited artists have made. Activist movements for social justice were also motivated by significant historical events, including the Vietnam War, changes in presidency, the AIDS epidemic, and later on, 9/11.

As these movements mobilized toward greater social equity were being made and being made more apparent, traditionalist, or normative, Americans felt as if the nation was losing control over order that it had once had. In truth, women and minorities had never had equal rights to white, middle-class, heteronormative men in the entirety of US history. Normative Americans sought to reach to the nuclear family ideals seen in shows like “Leave it to Beaver,” and suppress anyone whose reality was different. Hartman writes that they “prized hard work, personal responsibility, individual merit, delayed gratification, social mobility, and other values that middle-class whites recognized as their own.”

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As the social movements initiated in the 1960s grew, the art world became a more inclusive environment for emerging and innovative artists. The National Endowment for the Arts, a federal art program that awards funding for the arts, promised to enlist “fair representation of previously marginalized voices and visions.”8 It was in the 1970s and 1980s that, according to Cindy Carr’s book *The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz*, expressionist art also became popular, and “allowed a few outsiders in,” one of whom was David Wojnarowicz.9 These artists, new to the art world, were able to engage in experimental and subversive modes of art-making and express ideas about social issues and conditions with which they were familiar. According to the book *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, edited by Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson, “In the wake of the culture wars at the end of the 1980s, artists engaged with what became known as identity politics in art that questioned power inequities in relation to race, class, and sexuality.”10

This art emerging with the support of federal funds and engaging in radical and controversial topics clashed with the values of traditionalist Americans. With the expanded support of these artists, there was an assumption within the art world that “American society at large had embraced its avant-garde viewpoints.”11 Yet, traditionalist Americans who had felt as though they were losing a once “whole” America and had continually seen art as elitist, were largely opposed to this new art, especially when it addressed controversial social and cultural issues of religion or sexuality. In *Arresting Images*, a book written in the midst of the culture

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wars, the author discusses how those opposed to this emerging art, particularly vocal religious leaders and conservative cultural groups, argued against it on either moral grounds or for concern about maintaining the traditional artistic canon.\textsuperscript{12} Right-wing activists from organizations such as the American Family Association and the Catholic League attempted to censor art that appeared to be sacrilegious, homoerotic, or pornographic.\textsuperscript{13} In power during the culture wars under President Ronald Reagan’s administration, many conservative congressmen supported censorship efforts and effectively forced the NEA to restrict its funding and art programs by the end of the 1990s.\textsuperscript{14} In the following sections, I will discuss how the changing cultural atmosphere in the United States, and thus the growing division between traditionalist institutions, groups, and communities, and those of the New Left led to these heated debates over images.


In Richard Meyer’s essay for the exhibition catalogue Potentially Harmful, he discusses how the NEA has submitted to restricting funding and repressing the fact that it has become much more limited because of the culture wars.
Before the advent of the culture wars, censorship did have somewhat of a hold over artists in the United States, especially those dealing with controversial ideas, though, as we will see, in some cases it has been less publicized than those during the peak of the battles. As evident in Clapp’s book, anxiety caused by historical events and conditions, such as raised suspicion about communist sympathizers before and during the Cold War, was often the cause for suppression of certain images.¹⁵ In the 1980s, certain circumstances, including the AIDS epidemic, the Reagan administration (1981-1989), and the persisting social movements that had

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¹⁵ Clapp, *Art Censorship*. One artist who regularly and most notably faced censorship during this period was Diego Rivera. See index on page 547.
begun in the 1960s, influenced response and ways of spreading awareness about how those issues affected people.

Because some issues were largely ignored, suppressed, or misunderstood by the greater population of the United States, artists, especially those from communities with close ties to the issues sought platforms to express the complexities of such social conditions. Activist art came into being as large groups of people began purposefully utilizing material culture to spread awareness about certain issues, including AIDS. According to Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel’s book, “Other arenas that provided serious political content for contemporary art included feminist politics and issues of race, homelessness, corporate capitalism, consumerism, and militarism.”

For English-born artist Sue Coe, visualizing the realities of political and humanitarian issues, such as animal rights, rape culture, and the AIDS epidemic, was crucial for sensitizing people to capitalism, consumerism, and the abuses of power at play in the control and silencing of living beings. Her work often expresses the pain and violence experienced by those who cannot speak for themselves, particularly within structures of power.

Her work aims to bring into view these injustices of power. Sue Coe has said, “The majority of humans in this world are forced to witness without power...When I make art, I make more witnesses, and when there are enough witnesses, the horror stops.” Freedberg discusses how when something is ugly and vulgar, real, people don’t want to see it or call it art because “it elicits natural and realistic responses.” It is clear that Coe is attempting to get those responses by illuminating the real, ugly truths of the world in an effort to change it for the better.

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When she started working in the United States in 1972, she was primarily an illustrator for the *New York Times* and other news publications. Her illustrative work, *New Bedford Rape*, was commissioned by *Boston Magazine* as an accompanying image to an article about a high-profile rape case in 1984. The work itself depicts the graphic scene of the victim being held down by a group of men in the middle of a bar. Without her knowledge, Coe’s work was cropped in the magazine so that the majority of the victim’s naked body and many of her attackers were completely removed from the image. According to Coe’s statement for *Potentially Harmful*, “I was sad when I saw the published illustration, as it destroyed the content of the work and became about titillation, not the violence of the event. I took the small drawing that had been censored and made it into much larger paintings that were shown as I had intended.”\(^{19}\) In response to her illustration being cropped, Coe herself created an enlarged version to be displayed in a gallery.

Coe began creating independent work in the 1980s after being so often restricted and told to soften her work by editors.\(^{20}\) It was only in 1986 that she started working with animal rights subject matter, as we see in her two pieces that were in the exhibition. *What’s Your Cut?* is from her series titled *Porkopolis*, an emotion-evoking look at the realities of animal slaughter, and *Mickey Gets Cancer* defines the disparity between a classic and beloved character, Mickey the Mouse, and the mice and rats subjected to harmful practices of animal testing. While neither work owned by Ohio University’s Kennedy Museum of Art (KMA) was ever censored, they demonstrate Coe’s use of grotesque imagery to evoke a reaction to real violence and injustice that living beings experience, which was similarly seen in her censored work.

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19 Byrd, ed., *Potentially Harmful*, 82.
20 “Sue Coe at Galerie St. Etienne.”
Both *What’s Your Cut?* and *New Bedford Rape* also make visible the feminist agenda of revealing the dominating and objectifying nature of patriarchal society. Feminist movements that had spurred in the 1970s and 1980s “questioned the (masculine, Western) canon and proposed new politics of the body.” In the catalogue for *Potentially Harmful*, it describes that “Sue Coe, Anita Steckel, and Karen Finley interrogate the social controls—physical, discursive, and legal—that often regulate the female body through socially sanctioned, shame-driven tactics.” In her print, *What’s Your Cut?*, a woman is positioned parallel to a pig, and both of their bodies are sectioned off as cuts of meat to be processed and consumed. This treatment of the figures and the surrounding border of ribeyes and drumsticks reveals the control over and consumption (figurative and literal) of the bodies of living beings that Coe aims to address.

![Figure 2. Sue Coe, Bedford Rape, 1984, photo-etching on Rives paper. From Galerie St. Etienne, http://www.gseart.com/Artists-Gallery/Coe-Sue/Artworks/Coe-Sue-Bedford-Rape-396.php.](http://www.gseart.com/Artists-Gallery/Coe-Sue/Artworks/Coe-Sue-Bedford-Rape-396.php)

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21 Dumbadze and Hudson, eds., *Contemporary Art*, 237.
22 Ibid, 82.
Similarly, and more explicitly, in *New Bedford Rape* patriarchal control is evident in the actions taken against a woman by the group of men and the inaction of bystanders in a public bar. According to Coe, the censorship of this piece without her consent may not have been intentional, as deadlines for news publications necessitates quick editing of commercial work. Nevertheless, the most charged and significant part of the illustration was cropped, maintaining that the unnamed “cropper” purposefully removed the violent act at the center of her work because of its graphic nature. According to *Potentially Harmful*, “Feminists thus find themselves in a seemingly irreconcilable position of wanting both to dismiss oppressive forms of bodily shame and to articulate the particulars of women’s lives, which are often rooted in a place of shame.” The person who decided to remove this integral aspect of the illustration removed with it Coe’s attempt at communicating the violation of a woman and her body and the participation of men who were either rapists or bystanders in this violation.

Though censorship against art was not a particularly hot topic in the early 1980s, the art world was beginning to grapple with a changing social atmosphere. Activist artists like Sue Coe sought to change thought by exposing the injustices faced in the world. When she experienced covert censorship with the *Boston Magazine*, Coe took the reins of her work into her own hands, and found a new space (that being the gallery) as an independent artist to share the truth about violence, silence, and abuses of power in the United States.

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23 Dumbadze and Hudson, eds., *Contemporary Art*, 20.
24 Ibid, 84.
Advent of the Culture Wars: David Wojnarowicz

As artists became bolder in addressing issues that were ignored by those in power, the art world also began to support emerging and marginalized artists. The National Endowment for the Arts made a promise to include previously unheard voices, and in doing so gave more visibility to these suppressed issues. The shift in the 70s and 80s of the art world from minimalism to an embrace of expressionism opened it to recognize more artists who had previously not been considered. This, along with the increasing presence of AIDS, led to the exposing of once-marginalized communities, including queer culture and arts, particularly in the East Village where David Wojnarowicz lived. Wojnarowicz, who had previously vended his art on the

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26 Ibid.
street, was soon thrown into this group of emerging artists after being recognized by galleries in New York City.

As an artist and activist confronting the US government’s handling of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and the media’s attitude toward gay men, Wojnarowicz’s art expressed his rage at this treatment in an effort to gain visibility for himself and thus, for the homosexual community. In an interview with Barry Blinderman in October 1990 Wojnarowicz stated that, “if I’m going to be invisible in the reflection of society I’ll seek my visibility.”27 According to Elizabeth Child’s book Suspended License: Censorship and the Visual Arts, the artist’s tumultuous life influenced his art. She writes, “Wojnarowicz’s art allowed him to transcend the culture of repression which he had lived for the first half of his life.”28 Wojnarowicz’s purpose was to tell his truth, whether or not it was deemed valuable or offensive to viewers of his work. He said, “It’s as if I want to define something for myself that means something to me, but it doesn’t have to mean anything to anyone else.”29 While his work was clearly not meant as a provocation,30 it has variously been interpreted as explicit during his lifetime and even after his death. During his life, several of his written and visual works were targeted by censors as the culture wars peaked towards the end of the 1980s.

He was first censored in 1989 when he was involved in a partially NEA-funded exhibition about AIDS, called Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing at the Artists Space. In the exhibition’s catalogue he wrote an entry highly critical of Senator Jesse Helms and Patrick

28 Childs, Suspended License, 340.
29 Wojnarowicz and Blinderman, David Wojnarowicz, 50.
30 Carr, Fire in the Belly, 4.
Buchanan, who were vocal in their dismissal of the AIDS epidemic and “obscene” art.\textsuperscript{31} As a response to public criticism that the exhibition received from conservative members of Congress and other leaders of vocal groups, then-chairman of the NEA John Frohmayer, sent a letter to curator of the exhibition Nan Goldin. The Artists Space refused to obey Frohmayer’s requests for them to return the $10,000 grant and provide a disclaimer stating that the NEA did not support the exhibition or catalogue.\textsuperscript{32}

![Figure 4. David Wojnarowicz, Sex Series (tornado), 1990, photo collage. Larry Qualls Archive. From Artstor, http://library.artstor.org/#/asset/LARRY_QUALLS_1039542555.](http://library.artstor.org/#/asset/LARRY_QUALLS_1039542555)

A few years later, in 1990, Reverend Donald Wildmon made a brochure of cropped reproductions of Wojnarowicz’s work from the \textit{Sex Series} to make it look as though they were


\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 244.
simply pornographic images, and gave it to members of congress in hopes of limiting NEA funding. Wildmon purposefully juxtaposed the cropped images with a detail of Jesus Christ with a hypodermic needle in his arm from another of the artist’s work titled Genet. After the thousands of brochures were made and shared, Wojnarowicz filed a lawsuit against Donald Wildmon for copyright infringement and misrepresentation of his work. Wojnarowicz won, and received a symbolic check for one dollar, which he never cashed.

In October 1986, Wojnarowicz began documenting pictures and videos from a trip to Mexico that would later be used for his film A Fire in My Belly. A Fire in My Belly expressed both his interests and his concerns with societal structure and mortality. While in Mexico, he photographed fire ants with different objects that he considered symbolic. He said, “in the Mexican photographs with the coins and the clock and the gun and the Christ figure and all that, I used the ants as a metaphor for society because the social structure of the ant world is parallel to ours.” He had always himself understood mortality, and to Barry Blinderman, who interviewed him for the book Tongues of Flame, he described, “I could never bury the idea of mortality, it was always there, and I think for people to get a sense of mortality is something akin to examining the structure of society.” The bleeding, suffering Christ being swarmed by ants could also refer to the victims of HIV, of whom Wojnarowicz was one.

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33 Childs, Suspended License, 341–45.
34 Meyer, Outlaw Representation, 257-258.
35 Carr, Fire in the Belly, 339.
36 Wojnarowicz and Blinderman, David Wojnarowicz, 58.
37 Ibid., 51.
The video also reflects on the ways people use their belief systems and social rituals to persist in constrained societal structures. In speaking of the spirituality and sense of connectivity within Central and South American communities that he had encountered, he claimed that “It doesn’t discount the pain that they go through, or discount the mortality rate or discount the difficulty that they have in staying alive but there’s joy in the event of living that I really feel lacking in America.” A Fire in My Belly did not directly address AIDS or his views about Catholic religion as some of his other works did, but it made visible Wojnarowicz’s conception of mortality, and perhaps for himself and those who were also suffering from AIDS or otherwise, ways of living fully in spite of suffering.

Though the cultures wars effectively ended by the turn of the twenty-first century, resurgences of conservative censors have appeared, in an attempt to assert some control. Hartman notes that, “Many of the people who played a prominent role in the late twentieth century war for the soul of America are still waving the bloody flag.” Although his video was made in the 1987 and was left incomplete, A Fire in My Belly was first censored at the Smithsonian Institution in November 2010 when a four-minute cut of the video was shown in the exhibition Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture. William Donahue of the Catholic League, who had been equally involved during the culture wars, disliked specifically a scene in the film in which ants are shown crawling on a crucifix that was discussed in a conservative new publication. His complaints about the work eventually garnered the attention of senators John Boehner and Eric Cantor, who demanded that the National Portrait Gallery (NPG)

39 Wojnarowicz and Blinderman, David Wojnarowicz, 51.
40 Wojnarowicz and Blinderman, David Wojnarowicz, 59.
41 Hartman, A War for the Soul of America, 285.
42 Carr, Fire in the Belly, 1.
remove the scene or risk losing funding.\textsuperscript{43} Many of these conservative representatives had not even seen the video or exhibition in person or at all. While the Catholic league claimed that this particular scene was upsetting because it appeared to insult Christians, it was obvious from other conservative claims that these complaints came from a place of “anti-homosexual disgust.”\textsuperscript{44}

Without the consultation with the exhibition’s curators and under pressure of Boehner and Cantor, director of the National Portrait Gallery G. Wayne Clough removed the video from display.\textsuperscript{45} Fervent supporters and museums across the nation quickly responded the institution’s decision to censor Wojnarowicz’s work. Museums and galleries began showing the video in their spaces, and large groups of people protested in New York and Washington D.C. to show their support for \textit{A Fire in My Belly}. Wojnarowicz’s posthumous censorship was not all that different to his experiences during the culture wars, in that the censors didn’t differ in their motives and based their reasoning off cropped versions and biased descriptions about Wojnarowicz’s work.

While funding was threatened in both his experience at Artists Space and at the National Portrait Gallery, and people involved in the arts were pushed to censor his work, he has always had defenders, too. He defended his work when he sued Donald Wildmon, Nan Goldin and the Artists Space refused to bend to the demands of the NEA in 1989, and in 2010, his supporters became present and vocal when the artist himself was no longer around to stand up for his work. While Wojnarowicz sought to find a truth for himself, his life and work has encouraged others to be vocal for who and what they support.

\textsuperscript{43} Carr, \textit{Fire in the Belly},1.
\textsuperscript{44} Dumbadze and Hudson, \textit{Contemporary Art}, 340.
Institutional Censorship after the culture wars: Kara Walker

Figure 5. Installation view of *A Means to an End: Shadow Drama in Five Acts*, 1995 by Kara Walker. *Expression and Repression*, Kennedy Museum of Art, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. Photograph by Daniel King.

While the culture war censors were predominantly conservative leaders and organizations, the changing landscape of the art world also lent itself to criticism from traditional artists and institutions. Often, these groups were unsure about experimental art with unclear intentions and charged or contentious symbols. In the mid-1990s, Kara Walker was an up-and-coming artist, successful in the art market, but her work did not jive well with the existing body of work by African-American artists who had been working for decades to voice unheard narratives and bring down long-standing stereotypes.
In the mid-1990s, following the “compromise” made with NEA to limit their funding of the arts, conservative attacks on art lessened, but the defense of art that utilized charged subject matter was still questioned by liberal and conservative legislators alike. According to Adler, “When the new censors want to ban speech to achieve their goals, the new artists want to use and exploit the very speech that censors would ban.” As well, the art world also had to grapple with such ambiguous images and decide whether, and how they could be defended. Hartman states that, “by the 1980s and 1990s, many American liberals...argued that cultural representations were relatively powerless.” Their only defense was that these artistic productions reflected the expanse of free expression.

Kara Walker’s silhouette caricature works, including the two featured in the exhibition, directly address stereotyping of African-Americans since before Civil-War Era and how these stereotypes have been perpetuated in contemporary thought. By placing these cartoonish renderings of identity-less players in violent and abusive situations, her work both intrigues and repulses viewers. In David Wall’s article “Transgression, Excess, and the Violence of Looking in the Art of Kara Walker,” he writes that “the acknowledgement of the recoding, as opposed to the recording, of the black body in this way is central to Walker’s work.”

Her work, *A Means to an End: A Shadow Drama in Five Acts*, exhibits Walker’s interest in juxtaposing the playful with the grotesque so as to provoke reaction from the viewer. She creates ambiguous relationships between the characters and satirizes the cultural stereotypes of

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48 The two works are *A Means to an End*, borrowed from the High Museum of Art, and *Freedom: A Fable* from the Kennedy Museum of Art.
African Americans being objects of sexual desire and being subhuman.\textsuperscript{50} Her work asks society to come to terms with the past, and acknowledge its painful history and its existing markers so that they can be eradicated from the present.\textsuperscript{51} The work was made just prior to Adler’s article that states that in the last years of the twentieth century there was an ongoing conflict between two factions of leftists, one of which wanted to censor hate speech and pornography. Like much of the artwork that came into view in the 1980s and 1990s, Walker’s technique seems “to frame the horror and absurdity of the speech it appropriates, to erase its sting by taking it as its own, to borrow its effectiveness…to destroy its power to hurt.”\textsuperscript{52}

Walker has also been highly influenced by literature, and has made parodies of books such as \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} to expose the messages of racial relations embedded within in them. She recasts once sidelined characters to the forefront in the narratives she creates in her works. According to Peabody’s book, \textit{Consuming Stories: Kara Walker and the Imagining of American Race}, “Walker’s works follow some elements associated with narrative…Walker may cite authors, titles, and genres, but some of her images engage with specific works, particular stories, and identifiable casts of characters.”\textsuperscript{53} Her pop-up book \textit{Freedom: A Fable} (Figure 9) does not rely on a singular narrative, but is a play on antebellum literature. The title of the book itself reveals Walker’s point to expose the unattainability of true freedom for an African-American woman, even in the present. The book describes the journey of a woman who is a freed slave in the United States who seeks freedom by returning to Liberia. She discovers that freedom is truly

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 6–7.
\textsuperscript{52} Adler, “What’s Left?,” 1504.
impossible to find. Both this work and *A Means to an End* form narratives that are at once familiar, readable, and disjointed, so the activity remains ambiguous.

Figure 6. Installation view of *Freedom: A Fable*, 1997 by Kara Walker. *Expression and Repression*, Kennedy Museum of Art, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. Photograph by Daniel King.

Walker’s work has continually been topic of controversy among fellow artists because of her use of stereotypes. After she became one of the youngest artists to receive the MacArthur Fellowship at the age of twenty-seven, many African-American artists began to question Walker’s work. In an interview with her father, Walker stated that, “One argument was that the work shouldn’t be supported because it was perpetuating racist stereotypes. Another argument was that I was too young and getting too popular or too hot and that this was just a symptom of the racism of these institutions—I was only twenty-seven and hadn’t paid my dues.”

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One of her most prominent artist critics is Betye Saar. Saar, who had encouraged Walker to continue her art while she was in high school, came to find her work to be perpetuating racial stereotypes and fought to prevent her work from being shown in galleries and museums.\(^{55}\) Saar began a letter-writing campaign to urge galleries and museums to boycott Walker’s works, which Walker had heard about from Peter Norton.\(^{56}\) Another African-American artist, Howardena Pindell argued “that Walker’s transgression moves beyond the realm of the visual and violates the sanctity of the African-American struggle for justice and recognition.”\(^{57}\) According to Adler’s article, “Rifts exist…between feminists and AIDS activists, between feminists and feminists, between blacks and blacks.”\(^{58}\) Adler also argues that artists of historically marginalized communities make artwork that comes from their experiences, but that does not make them a representative for all of their community.\(^{59}\) Shaw suggests that Kara Walker “follows an avant garde tradition of African American artists who have chosen to sacrifice communal approval for their work in favor of the freedom to pursue independent and sometimes transgressive visions.”\(^{60}\)

One edition of *A Means to an End* was censored in 1999 while it was displayed at the Detroit Institute of Art in an exhibition called *Where the Girls Are*. The decision to remove it was made by the museum administration after they received complaints from African American artists.\(^{61}\) A chair member of the Friends of African and African American Art stated that, “The

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\(^{55}\) Boucher, "Kara Walker."


\(^{58}\) Adler, “What’s Left?,” 1505.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 1557.

\(^{60}\) Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable*, 6-7.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 105.
organization didn’t feel that this was an appropriate time for the display of the work.”

According to Shaw, one of the curators, Nancy Sojka, said that the museum was underprepared to defend or explain the work to those who saw it as offensive, and didn’t have someone who would be able to do so on their staff.

Of the artists in the exhibition, Kara Walker has had the most recent censorship experience with a different work in a place outside of the gallery. In 2012, Kara Walker’s sketch the moral arc of history ideally bends towards justice but just as soon as not curves back around toward barbarism, sadism, and unrestrained chaos (Figure 10) was displayed in a New Jersey Library. About the work Kara Walker said that, “I wanted to make a point about the way these images arose for many when Barack Obama (pictured at a little lectern on the mid-left) gave his

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62 Ibid.
63 Shaw, Seeing the Unspeakable, 112.
national speech on race.” The drawing had offended some of the library employees including Sandra West, who said that “I really don’t like to see my people like this. We need to see something uplifting and not demeaning,” and shortly after the complaints were made, the image was covered with a cloth. The library director Wilma Grey decided to uncover it and felt that it was important that the library, which values freedom of expression, show her work even if they don’t agree with it. She saw it as an opportunity start discussion and learn about Walker’s confrontational strategy.

Kara Walker’s work has continually been seen as ambiguous, which has lead to drastically different readings of it by both artists and institutions. For museums, her work has been difficult to defend against opposition. Artists of older generations from these communities have seen it as playing into the interests of white people who have invested in her work and thus, perpetuating the stereotypes that they have continually attempted to eradicate through their own work. But, as Wilma Grey noted about her decision, the work inspires discussion about the strategies that the artist uses to address complex issues of race and gender.

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64 Boucher, “Kara Walker.”
65 Boucher, “Kara Walker.”
66 Ibid.
New answers to old problems: John Sims

Figure 8. Installation view of *The Proper Way to Hang a Confederate Flag*, 2004 by John Sims. *Expression and Repression*, Kennedy Museum of Art, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. Photograph by Daniel King.

By the end of the 1990s, after the NEA restricted its funding, the art world significantly settled from the flourish of art-making that had begun in the 1980s.\(^67\) Although the division within the United States was less obvious than during the culture wars, vocal, familiar groups have continually made their agendas known and have remained steadfast in their defenses. More

\(^{67}\) Ault, et al., Art Matters, 22-23.
controversial groups, like the Sons of Confederate Soldiers, have promulgated that their existence pays homage to Southern heritage, but have used a symbol, the Confederate Flag, that has had violent and oppressive ties. John Sims chose to use this charged symbol to not only bring awareness to the power dynamics associated with it, but also instigate critical response.

After this Detroit-based artist visited the South, John Sims became acutely aware of the presence of the Confederate flag as a charged symbol of the Civil War, race relations, and Southern Heritage.⁶⁸ The Proper Way to Hang a Confederate Flag (Figure 11) was part of his ongoing series, the Recoloration Proclamation, which addressed these particular issues of charged symbolism by restaging the flag. The Recoloration Proclamation project has included multimedia products and events, including Burn and Bury, a recurring, nationwide event in which the flag in burned; Afro-Dixie Remixes featuring different renditions of the song “I Wish I Was in Dixie” by different musicians; and his installation of The Proper Way to Hang a Confederate Flag. The Confederate flag as well as the flags of other nations were altered or positioned in provocative ways as to encourage discussion of their symbolic significances. According to John Sims’ website, “In a visual political context the work initiates a difficult discourse on the psychological complexities of symbol warfare.”⁶⁹

Just as the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic urged the use of certain visual language, the events of 9/11 are important for use of the word ‘terrorism’ that Sims uses to describe the symbolic significance of the Confederate Flag. Both Potentially Harmful, written in 2006, and an article about John Sim’s Recoloration Proclamation, written in 2002, reference terrorism. In “Ain’t Just Whistling Dixie,” the author describes John Sim’s flag work as being “a form of

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⁶⁹ Ibid.
anti-terrorism. For Sims, the Confederate flag, with its big bad X, is a form of ‘visual terrorism’ that is still potent today.” As a symbol that has been inextricably tied to racism from the Civil War, Jim Crow era, and in recent decades, it has intimidating, terroristic implications. Sims’ work defines the next step for the flag as its extraction from contemporary usage, and critical discussion to dismantle contemporary Confederate ideals and practices.

In 2004, when Sim was involved in a solo exhibition at The Schmucker Gallery at Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, he intended to install The Proper Way to Hang the Confederate Flag on a gallows outdoors to mark its symbolic death. According to the director of the Schmucker Gallery, Molly Hutton, the presence of the Confederate Flag was an issue, especially for African-Americans who lived in Gettysburg, and she believed that Sims’ work could initiate a dialogue around this issue. After a press release was issued by the college, the gallery was inundated with emails from neo-confederate groups angry about the exhibition, and some even threatened to protest or initiate violence. Due to complaints from the Sons of Confederate Veterans and other community members, the college installed the work indoors. According to Hutton, “As our security became more and more involved, and then the FBI and the Borough of Gettysburg police, it became more and more clear that we potentially could have a major problem here.”

The gallery administration suggested having the installation placed indoors, and although Sims had agreed to have the installation moved indoors after a few hours to be hung on a bracket, he did not agree with the gallery’s decision to only install it indoors. Sims responded to

the gallery’s decision by boycotting the exhibition as “an act of self-censorship that allowed Sims to reassert some control over his own visibility, if not that of his artwork.” Despite Sims purposeful absence from the exhibition’s opening, the publicity that the controversy had garnered brought a very large crowd.

In the period in between his first attempt at hanging the flag at Gettysburg College and his performance and Ohio University this past fall, The Proper Way to Hang a Confederate Flag has received backlash in many of the spaces to which it has been brought. In 2007, at the Brogan Art Museum in Tallahassee, Florida, Bob Hurst, the chapter commander of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, emailed the museum and requested that the installation be removed from the exhibition, “AfroProvocations.” Further attempts to censor this work have persisted in different museums, though it has not been removed from any institution. It was also displayed in an exhibition titled Potentially Harmful: The Art of American Censorship at Georgia State University, in Atlanta, Georgia, in 2005.

When he came to Ohio University in October of 2017, John Sims performed for the first time since his attempt at Gettysburg College The Proper Way to Hang the Confederate Flag at Scripps Amphitheater. At high noon, “I Wish I Was in Dixie” was played on the trumpet, and the flag was hung on a full-size gallows. Students, faculty, and community members of Athens, Ohio performed poems, speeches, and music as part of the performance. Sims performed the “Gettysburg Redress,” a speech that re-interpreted Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” to the voice highly problematic nature of the Confederacy and its symbols.

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72 Byrd et al., Potentially Harmful, 46.
73 “Neo-Confederate Activists Pressure Museum Officials to Distort History.”
John Sims continues to work against white nationalist agenda by co-opting the Confederate flag and spreading thought about its racist ties and supporters, the value of those symbols as terroristic, and the ways in which we eradicate them from use. According to the article “Ain’t just Whistling Dixie,” “All three sides of Sims are engaged in the same fundamental task: to ‘identify problems’ that often are slippery, elusive, difficult to pin down and articulate and then to take action by making the problems visible in various (and sometimes revisioned) ways.” His work aims less so to physically “kill” the Confederate flag one by one, but rather start a conversation with those who see value in the flag and encourage emotional change person by person, so that the ideals behind the flag will be brought to justice and its use no longer appropriate. It’s heritage is a tainted one, representative of segregation, violence against a group of people, and an objectification of those people.

Harris, “Ain’t Just Whistling Dixie,” 52.
Reflection and Conclusion

For these artists, the circumstances surrounding their experiences forced them or their supporters and institutions, to make decisions about the value of their work to the audience of those particular spaces. Before the culture wars, censorship was not unknown to the United States, but there were fewer specific and notable periods in which images were being censored in this country. In past and present societies, censorship has been a product of either dissenting groups trying to gain power by rejecting the norm or an authoritative group attempting to maintain or regain control by repressing opposition. Art censorship in the United States has evidently often been in reaction to ongoing events, like the Cold War, which prompted suspicion about communism. With the advent of growing social movements, major historical events, and
thus, artistic response to those from the mid-twentieth century, the art world became broader, more experimental, visible, and liable to criticism. As traditionalist Americans, who were already losing their sense of “America,” became more aware of this turn in art, they sought to suppress it, and, often indirectly, suppress those who made it. These stark differences in the understanding of a national identity are what culminated in the period of the culture wars, in which heated, public debates over what and whether art should be federally funded ensued.

Though the NEA finally conceded in the mid-1990s to restricting their funding, the uncertainty surrounding images containing charged subject matter and symbols remained a worry among established groups and institutions, including artistic communities, as well as lawmakers attempting to identify what qualifies as hate speech and pornography, when artists were co-opting such issues into their work. For the exhibited artists, the twenty-first-century has presented censors and challenges that were present during and before the culture wars, but often with less frequency and fervor. Just as censorship before the culture wars was less intense, but known, censorship after the culture wars has been less common. The prevalence of censorship during the culture wars reflected the proliferation of art and social change in the United States. A settling of the art world reeled back the conservative push against the NEA by the end of the 1990s. While institutions have often been complacent to opposition received from superiors or those with more power, there are individuals that have continually supported artists who have been targeted by censors, especially in cases where the artists themselves are not present.

While artwork like that of Sue Coe, David Wojnarowicz, Kara Walker, and John Sims implicates both negative and positive feedback, the confrontational nature of their work evokes discussion, or at the very least, critical internal response. In exhibitions about censorship,
including *Potentially Harmful, Irreverent*, and *Expression and Repression: Contemporary Art Censorship in America*, their work and their experiences with censorship demonstrate that art can provoke strong emotional reactions. In John Sims’ lecture at Ohio University he discussed that his work seeks to change people's’ emotions, and that it is a long process to do so.

Although the artists in this exhibition intend to urge discussion with confrontational images, debate about what images contribute to conversations about social issues become troublesome for institutions and federal organizations that must choose what art and artists to fund. Because these exhibited works utilize such charged imagery and have been so contentious, institutions must decide what role these works play in an exhibition. Institutional neutrality has often led to these internally conflicting points-of-view about defending and funding artists, which was present in censoring decisions made in the cases of David Wojnarowicz and Kara Walker. David Wasserman’s essay in *Censoring and Silencing*, describes how governmental neutrality would make it impossible to make decisions about whether to federally fund art. For this reason, the author states that “the government’s commitment to greater equality may give public agencies reason to oppose some artistic and scientific projects even as it gives them reason to support others.”

Because language (including visual), as Adler describes, is fluid and indeterminate, it is impossible to censor hate speech and pornography without consequently censoring activist art that appropriates such language to make visible certain social conditions.

Museums, galleries, and news media publications alike, have a commitment to framing people’s stories and allowing them to tell their truth because their stories are complex,

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76 *Irreverent: A Celebration of Censorship* was an exhibition held at the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in 2015.


78 Adler, “Hate Speech and Pornography,” 1499.
sometimes misunderstood, unacknowledged, or misrepresented. In the book *New Museum Theory and Practice*, Janet Marstine states that “As a unity, the essays [in the book]...look to a museum that is transparent in its decision-making, willing to share power, and activist in promoting human rights.”\(^{79}\) In my experience as the curator of *Expression and Repression* I, myself, had to consider how to frame these artists, their works, and their experiences with censorship. Despite the decades that separate me from the culture wars, some of the same worries about the power of art to incite certain outbursts or anger were present in my experience curating this show.

When my thesis advisor, Courtney Kessel, and I approached the Kennedy Museum of Art’s director Ed Pauley and exhibitions manager Jeff Carr, we talked about the display of John Sims’ piece, because in the shows that it had been in previously, it had been hung in different variations either on a gallows or against a wall on a bracket. Because of the gallery’s size, we decided that the bracket would be the best fit for the space. After Sims contacted me during the summer, I directed him to correspond with Jeff Carr to discuss shipping and display of his work. Sims brought up the idea of doing the full-size gallows of his work outside of the museum. Although Carr was open to this, Pauley feared that, though the Athens community is generally open, there could be push back from Neo-Confederate community members, and also he had concerns about bad weather causing damage to the installation.

After some deliberation, Sims agreed to have it indoors, but although he had displayed the flag against the wall in previous exhibitions, he wanted to move it away from the wall and display it on a small scale gallows. For Carr, the time it would take to build, the size of the

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gallows, and its central position were problematic. This display, for Sims, was non-negotiable, and the restrictions that the museum wanted to impart seemed repressive of his work. Sims, who had previously visited Ohio University, contacted his colleagues from the college as well as the National Coalition Against Censorship to weigh in on the museum’s conditions. Through conversations with these groups and Matthew Shaftel, the Dean of the College of Fine Arts, the museum agreed to display Sims’ work as he intended and invited him to come to campus to conduct a lecture and panel discussion during the week of the exhibition’s opening. Sims was also able to perform *The Proper Way to Hang a Confederate Flag* on campus through community sponsorship.

The preparation of this exhibition exposed me to a lot of new challenges that I had not encountered in my past experiences with museum work. I had to correspond and meet with people from many different departments and institutions, work on multiple projects for the same exhibition simultaneously, and keep track of many different deadlines. When I approached this idea of curating an exhibition, I did not know how many people would necessarily be involved in its execution, or how difficult it would be to negotiate and communicate with everyone. It was surely not a seamless process, but with advising from my more experienced colleagues, I was able to resolve any issues that arose about events or installation, while at the same time organize the content of the exhibition.

When the show was up, I was able to engage further with people through a gallery talk and individual conversations. It was valuable to me to see how other people saw this small exhibition, and what their thoughts were about the artists and their experiences. John Sims’ visit demonstrated the importance of having multiple voices speaking about the issues encompassed
in the exhibition, and having multiple ways of engaging with the works. If I were to do this exhibition again, I would like to continue discussion outside of the exhibition, perhaps by doing different forms of programming and reaching out to other artists involved in the show. During the week of the exhibition’s opening, I remember seeing current students on their way to class, as well as prospective students who were visiting campus, walk by Scripps Amphitheater as John Sims’ performance was happening. I wondered if any had stopped to watch the performance for a minute or two, especially if they had been given no context to what exactly was happening with a certainly recognizable and charged symbol, the Confederate flag. As seen in the censorship experiences, attention from people not familiar with the trends in the art world has yielded both strong opposing and supporting stances. If I were to repeat this exhibition, perhaps I would try to engage the wider public with the show in a similar way to John Sims’ open-air performance.

When we see these works, we are confronted by complex issues that do not always have clear answers. That these artists have been censored or seen as controversial reveals our deeply disparate views of these issues. Their right to freedom of expression defends these artists’ ability to make critical and provocative works such as these. As shown in their clashes with censors, they also can elicit critical discussion about how on an individual level, we respond to persisting social issues, including sexism, racism, homophobia. By confronting these issues using charged subject matter, artists initiate emotional reactions that can be vital reshaping or informing our attitudes during times of great societal and cultural change. Museums and institutions of culture have a commitment to communicating complex stories and creating a space that encourages dialogue, rather than hostility. The current cultural climate has allowed for Expression and Repression: Contemporary Art Censorship in America to continue this conversation.
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“Sue Coe at Galerie St. Etienne.” *Galerie St. Etienne.* 2012.


**Figures**

Figure 1. King, Daniel. Installation view of (left to right) *What’s Your Cut?,* 1989 and *Mickey Gets Cancer,* 1990 by Sue Coe. *Expression and Repression,* Kennedy Museum of Art, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. From the collections of Kennedy Museum of Art, Athens, Ohio.


Figure 5. King, Daniel. Installation view of *A Means to an End: Shadow Drama in Five Acts,* 1995 by Kara Walker. From the collections of High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia. *Expression and Repression,* Kennedy Museum of Art, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio.


Figure 7. Walker, Kara. *the moral arc of history ideally bends towards justice but just as soon as not curves back around toward barbarism, sadism, and unrestrained chaos,* 2010, graphite and pastel on paper. Newark Public Library (artwork © Kara Walker). From Hyperallergic, [https://hyperallergic.com/67125/the-controversies-of-kara-walker/](https://hyperallergic.com/67125/the-controversies-of-kara-walker/).


Figure 9. Spilger, Erica. John Sim’s performance of “Confederate Flag: A Public Hanging” at Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. October 26, 2017.

Figure 10. King, Daniel. Installation view of *Expression and Repression,* Kennedy Museum of Art, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio.