In the spring of 2017, only weeks away from the public re-opening of its large Sculpture Garden, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis slammed into a cultural conflict of historic proportions. The focal point, newly installed following the $10 million renovation of the Sculpture Garden, was “Scaffold” by Sam Durant, a two-stories tall gallows evoking historic hangings.

The sculpture combined elements of scaffolds used in the executions of John Brown, Saddam Hussein and, most significantly, a group of 38 Dakota men in Mankato, near Minneapolis, in 1862. The provocative sculpture, already seen by wide audiences in Europe, carried a compassionate message about the horrors of oppression, yet became embroiled in a fast-moving protest that threatened to turn violent.

“We had not reached out to the Native community,” says Annie Gillette Cleveland, who was Chief of Strategic Communications for the Walker Art Center at the time. What followed was what Ms. Gillette Cleveland calls “a perfect storm” of media, protests and lightning-fast developments that led ultimately to the work being ceremoniously dismantled and handed over to a group of Dakota leaders.

Ordered by President Abraham Lincoln, the Mankato hangings were the largest mass execution in the history of the US. “It’s a very, very deep open wound for the Dakota community,” Ms. Gillette Cleveland says. “Many of the protesters can link their lineage back to people who were one of the 38.”

In addition, the Native American community already felt under-represented at the center. In the aftermath of “Scaffold,” one Native community leader told The New York Times, “The Walker’s track record of Native artists is pretty much nonexistent.”

The Walker is a globally recognized hub of both local culture and internationally acclaimed contemporary artwork. As she managed the communications, was Ms. Gillette Cleveland aware of the international audience of museum professionals?

“Oh yeah. I think every museum across the world was reading about ‘Scaffold,’” she says. “This was everybody’s nightmare.”
What led to the dismantling of “Scaffold”? We were scheduled to re-open the Sculpture Garden in June. The space is on Park Board land, which is also historically Dakota land—a private/public arrangement for this amazing gem in the middle of Minneapolis. The garden held 60 sculptures—18 of them were new. Meantime, we were running a museum with one of our biggest exhibitions ever, on Merce Cunningham. So we were very, very busy. We could see the sculptures through the fencing. Sam Durant’s “Scaffold” was hard to miss. It had a prominent place at one of the Sculpture Garden entrances where school busses would soon park and kids would enter into the Sculpture Garden. It almost looked like a backyard playscape, but it was a gallows, and so, very ominous looking. Many of the staff were concerned about its scale and what it represented.

Our online managing editor—who writes content about the art world, about artists, about the Walker—interviewed Sam. Before we published it, I found some language that I thought was problematic, so I sent it over to my sister at the Minnesota History Center. She’s done a lot of work with Native communities, specifically on the immediate situation, “You don’t have a language problem, Annie. You have a sculpture problem.”

I quickly decided to take this looming issue to Olga Viso, the Executive Director. So we met with Native art world experts who said, “That sculpture has to come down or you will suffer irreparable consequences.” And that’s where it all started.

What did the artist intend with that work? He wanted to open up these difficult histories around racial and criminal justice, to show that the US government had sanctioned these killings, allowed mass lynchings of people of color. He wanted it to be a learning space—but he now believes that he really miscalculated how it would be received.

No memorial has ever been built for this mass execution. So for Sam Durant, of California, to come and do it—on Dakota land—seemed to many to be inappropriate and insensitive. There were some sad and daunting statistics for the Native population here in Minnesota. And the staff was mortified that the Walker Art Center would add to what is already a tragic burden in their community. But that was the trajectory that emerged. From the Native perspective, it seemed like a prime example of how the white society does not understand or care about the Dakota people or their history.

One of the things Sam said was, “My work was created with the idea of creating a zone of discomfort for whites. Your protests have now created a zone of discomfort for me.” He would say it took on a new, deeper meaning that speaks a lot to his original purpose.

Did the protests surprise others at the center? You can never predict what a crisis is going to be. That’s what makes it a crisis. We were all planning for other scenarios, like we wouldn’t be able to open the gates on time because construction would be behind or people coming into the Garden, something was going to go wrong. It was the best decision I ever made. Once Olga’s letter was posted on The Circle’s digital platform, we were flooded in. He was on camera with Olga. The Dakota people were burning it down at 3 p.m. And at 2 p.m., Sam, over the phone from California, agreed to let them have it. Neither Sam nor the Walker wanted anyone to be physically harmed or arrested. We notified the Board, the sculpture or its removal. Mr. Durant handed over artistic rights to the Dakota. A Native American construction company was hired to dismantle the artwork and a ceremony accompanied its removal.

What was the fallout internally? The staff has had to put up with a lot of emotional turmoil, including Olga Viso’s departure in November. They’ve had to defend the reputation of a place they love and adore. “Scaffold” is still discussed, but it’s a very sobering day for everybody. Sam had flown in. He was on camera with Olga. The Dakota leaders were there—it was incredibly emotional. Moving the grand opening by a week meant no pressure to advise us, and they both categorically said, “It has to come down.” From the standpoint of any curator, that isn’t really a solution. The artist should be free to say what they want, no matter how difficult, and it’s our job to interpret. So, at their suggestion, Olga wrote a letter of apology for not engaging the Native community prior to erecting and placing this piece, and sent it to The Circle, a small indigenous news platform, for a full day, we were trained on communication preparation with the PR team, the Board and entire leadership staff at the Walker—how to recognize when something is going to be a crisis, and what to do once it hits. With hundreds of thousands of people coming into the Garden, something was going to go wrong. It was the best decision I ever made.

First, take care of the staff. Honest communication to and from staff is incredibly important. With all of the critical news from outside and heightened tension to and from staff is incredibly important. We do now?” We’d never been through this situation before, but we were more prepared and aligned. We had identified our key stakeholders a year in advance so we knew how and when to communicate to them.

The second thing is, support the leader. The Sculpture Garden renovation is really Olga’s legacy. Give her your honest point of view, but support her as the leader. Whether we agreed with the sculpture or not, our team’s job was to give her the ability to communicate her vision, her decisions.

Third, talk to your team. Tell the truth. Honest communications to and from staff is incredibly important. With all of the critical news from outside and heightened emotions within the Walker, our Board and leadership team made staff well-being a major priority.

Have others in the museum community contacted you about your experience? I do get a couple calls here and there, like, “We think we or a colleague are coming up and we would love your perspective.” I obviously learned a lot through this experience.

The staff has had to put up with a lot of emotional turmoil, including Olga Viso’s departure in November. They’ve had to defend the reputation of a place they love and adore. “Scaffold” is still discussed, but it’s a very sobering day for everybody. Sam had flown in. He was on camera with Olga. The Dakota leaders were there—it was incredibly emotional. Moving the grand opening by a week meant no pressure to accommodate its dismantling. 

On Saturday, there were rumors that the protesters were going burn it down at 3 p.m. And at 2 p.m., Sam, over the phone from California, agreed to let them have it. Neither Sam nor the Walker wanted anyone to be physically harmed or arrested. We notified the Board, the sculpture or its removal. Mr. Durant handed over artistic rights to the Dakota. A Native American construction company was hired to dismantle the artwork and a ceremony accompanied its removal. Mr. Durant handed over artistic rights to the Dakota. It’s a very difficult topic for the staff. But fundamentally, “Scaffold” is still discussed, but it’s a very sobering day for everybody. Sam had flown in. He was on camera with Olga. The Dakota leaders were there—it was incredibly emotional. Moving the grand opening by a week meant no pressure to accommodate its dismantling.

When was the sculpture finally dismantled? On Saturday, there were rumors that the protesters were going burn it down at 3 p.m. And at 2 p.m., Sam, over the phone from California, agreed to let them have it. Neither Sam nor the Walker wanted anyone to be physically harmed or arrested. We notified the Board, the sculpture or its removal. Mr. Durant handed over artistic rights to the Dakota. A Native American construction company was hired to dismantle the artwork and a ceremony accompanied its removal. Mr. Durant handed over artistic rights to the Dakota. It’s a very difficult topic for the staff. But fundamentally, “Scaffold” is still discussed, but it’s a very sobering day for everybody. Sam had flown in. He was on camera with Olga. The Dakota leaders were there—it was incredibly emotional. Moving the grand opening by a week meant no pressure to accommodate its dismantling.