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# REVOLUTION

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Interview with Kathleen Gilrain

## An Art Exhibit to be Part of “Changing the Trajectory”

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A significant exhibit is now at Smack Mellon gallery in Brooklyn, New York, from January 17 to February 22. **RESPOND**, a display of artistic answers to the epidemic of police murders and the refusal of the government to prosecute the killers, includes the work of 200 artists. *Revolution* correspondent Li Onesto recently talked with Kathleen Gilrain, the executive director and chief curator of Smack Mellon, about the exhibit and the work of the gallery.

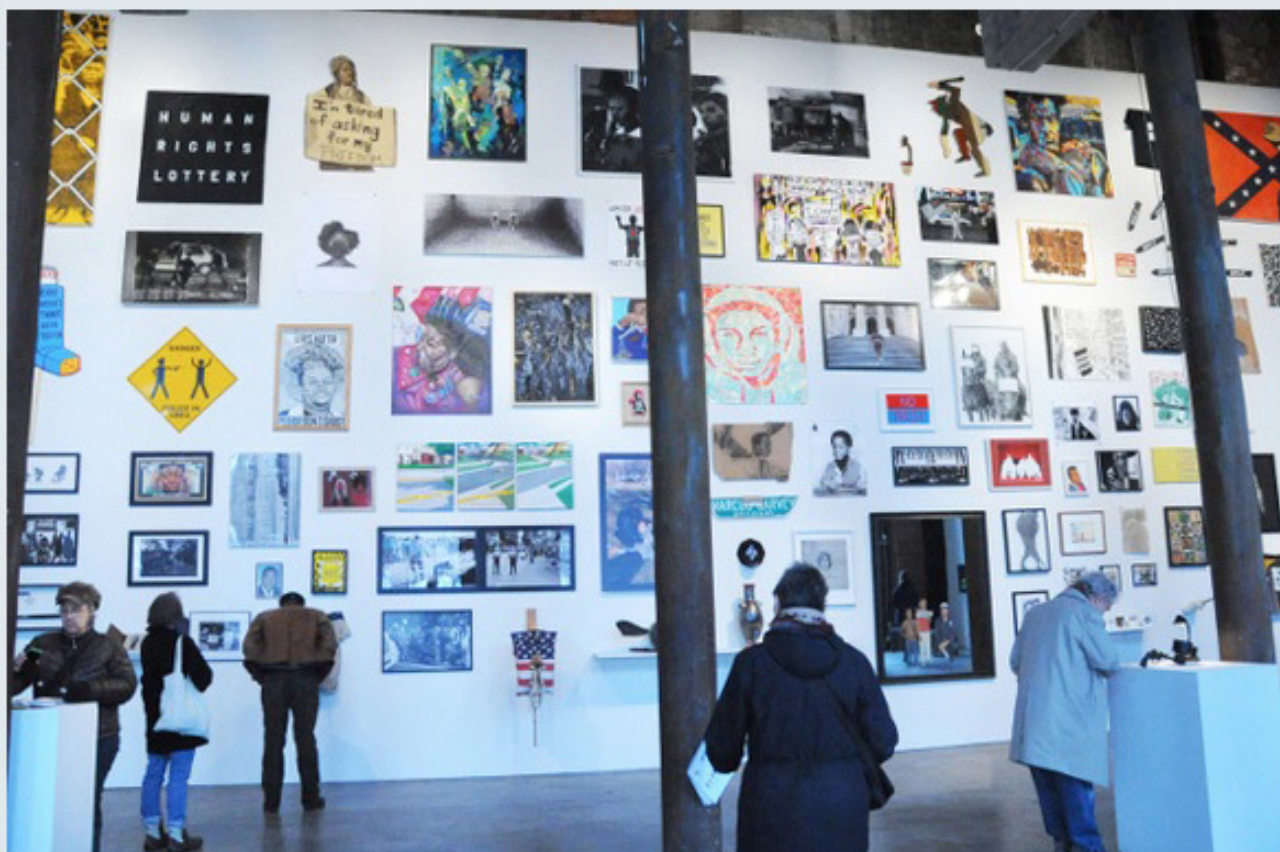


Photo: Li Onesto/[revcom.us](http://revcom.us)

**Revolution:** To begin, could you just talk about how this exhibit came about, how the idea came about and then how the show came together?



**Kathleen Gilrain:** I think it was December 3 that the grand jury came out with its decision not to indict the police officer who killed Eric Garner. And the city had erupted in protest and I was just feeling like we as an organization have a very large space where we could do something. I wasn't sure exactly what that would be, an exhibition, or just public meetings, using the gallery for another kind of response in addition to protest. So I thought about it that night and came in the morning and spoke with Suzanne Kim, who is the deputy director, about the idea of making our space available to artists and members of the community, not only artists, to respond. And so we decided together that we wanted to do it.

We needed to ask the artists whom we had already scheduled for exhibitions for December and January. So the first thing we had to do was get in touch with them and see if we could postpone their exhibitions and reschedule their dates for a time in the future, which they were willing to do. And then the staff met, which is really just three people, Suzanne and I and Erin Donnelly. And we talked about what are the different things that we could do. And we talked about an open call for exhibiting work that would give artists an opportunity, and it could include artwork and some of the visuals people were using in the protests, photos taken during the protests, it could be anything related to what was happening.

So we decided to do that and that we would also open up the space for community organizers and people who might want to lead a workshop, have a poetry reading, show a film or have a panel discussion, or really anything that people in the community, in the broad community of New York City, would need a space for because when things like this happen people don't necessarily have the space where they can house a number of people to get involved. So with an exhibition and public programs, we pretty quickly realized that we wouldn't be able to organize this on our own, so we invited the artists who are currently in our Artist Studio Program to help us. The Smack Mellon Artist Studio Program awards six studios a year to artists for free so that they can create new work. Artists apply and are selected by a panel of curators. They get the studio for one year. Esteban del Valle, Molly Dilworth, Oasa DuVerney, Ira Eduardovna, Steffani Jemison, and Dread Scott worked with us as lead organizers. They helped us select the artwork for the exhibition and they helped us promote this idea of opening up the space for other organizations or people to submit a proposal for an event. So we put everything on a website called "submittables" and people could apply to be in the show or to organize an event.

**Revolution:** This was quite ambitious. From the beginning to when the show went up, how long did this take?

**Kathleen Gilrain:** Well, we met on December 4 as the staff and a few days later we met with the artists. We met for a full day to plan how it would all come together. On December 15 we opened the website for people to apply. We promoted it broadly to art organizations as well as community organizations, and each of us promoted it to our own lists and through Facebook, etc. So very quickly the opportunity was out there in the world. I sent it out to a lot of art organizations that also sent it out to their lists. And people started submitting.



**Revolution:** And you got a tremendous response, right?

**Kathleen Gilrain:** We had a little over 600 artists submit an image of artwork, and a lot of events as well that people submitted. So we went through everything and selected the artwork. That was the first thing we got done because we needed the artists to drop off their work by January 5. So there was very little time for them to apply, get a notification that they were accepted in the exhibition, and then drop off their artwork.

**Revolution:** I'm just curious, how does this compare to how an exhibition is usually done?

**Kathleen Gilrain:** Well, we're usually planning an exhibition a year in advance. So this was completely insane.

**Revolution:** This was really commendable; it seems you felt a certain urgency...

**Kathleen Gilrain:** Yeah, well it wouldn't have made sense to plan an exhibition about this to happen next year. That would be more like a "this is what happened last year" exhibition. I mean, it's not like the issue is going to go away. I mean, it's still going to be an issue but it just seemed that if we're going to do it, we felt like we had to do it right away, because artists and others wanted a space to express themselves in another way, in a different way.

Our email list is about 10,000 and it's a broad mix, mostly people who are interested in art, artists, people who go to museums. I mean, we are an art organization so that's mostly who our list is. But when we were promoting this exhibition we made an effort to reach out to other organizations that are not art organizations, like community organizers. So people who got information about this exhibition are not just people on our list. We specifically reached out to other kinds of organizations that have different kinds of lists so that it could be a broad range of people who would find out about the show.

**Revolution:** I understand that a broad range of artists contributed to the exhibit.

**Kathleen Gilrain:** We had a response that was really worldwide. We had artists from different countries and artists across the country. And many of them are artists who don't really have an exhibition record. There were a lot of artists for whom this was their first exhibition in New York City and a lot of artists for whom this was their first exhibition ever anywhere. So that tells you a lot about who the artists are. And then of course all the artists who have shown with us in the past or who have come to our shows got the information too, so there are certainly artists who are well known and somewhat known in the show and who are participating as professional artists in the art world in New York City.



I don't know what the percentage is, but there are a lot of artists in this show who would not be considered professional artists, who might be just starting out or who don't make artwork all the time, but maybe just needed to make something in response to this. When they proposed work, we didn't even ask for a resume, we weren't looking at who's the most well known, who's got a reputation, or who has been shown where, we don't even know that. We just asked for an image of their work and a brief statement about the artwork they were submitting and their address so we knew where the work was coming from. I did send out an email to all of the artists in the show asking them to let me know if this was their first time showing in New York, so that's how I know there were a lot of responses to that email, that for a lot of the artists, this is the first time showing in New York; over 35 artists replied that this is the first time showing in New York.

**Revolution:** What kind of responses have you gotten to the show?

**Kathleen Gilrain:** People have really been appreciative of the fact that we were able to change our exhibition schedule, which is pretty unheard of. We work really far in advance, we raise money to fund the exhibitions, and there is a lot to do to get ready for an exhibition. So this is something that most organizations would just not be able to do. So people understand that and are really appreciative that we made the effort to free up the space and free up the opportunity.

**Revolution:** Maybe you could talk some about the overall mission of Smack Mellon.

**Kathleen Gilrain:** Smack Mellon's mission is to nurture and support emerging, under-recognized mid-career and women artists in the creation and exhibition of new work, by providing exhibition opportunities, studio workspace, and access to equipment and technical assistance for the realization of ambitious projects. We do this through our exhibition program, our Artist Studio Program, and we have an education program called Art Ready where we are working with teens. Art Ready is an after-school program that runs from October through May. In the fall we take the students on a series of studio visits, and then January through May the students work with one of those artists in their studio. The student is mentored by that artist not only in making art but also helping them with college applications, portfolios, and giving them an idea of what it is to be a professional artist. We accept 20 students in that program; it's a great program and they get a real look at what it is to be an artist in NYC. What we want them to get out of it is an understanding of what a professional artist's life is like. We have a range of artists we work with, including architects, designers, painters, and filmmakers. So it's a range of what they get to see, and we want them to see that if they are going to major in art in college, what the reality is, so they can have the information to decide if they really want to pursue a career in art.



Through our Artist Studio Program, we give artists a free studio space for one year, a fellowship and technical support, meaning access to equipment and technical assistance to make new work. Our current group of artists, and this is one of the reasons we asked them to help us with this exhibition, are making works that address current issues, politics and power structures, and/or are working within communities. I knew before I asked them that they would want to be involved in this exhibition, they would be interested in it. Had we had a different group of artists in our studios when this happened, I may not have asked them to help us; I may have asked some other people to help us. But I knew this group would be interested and would want this to happen and would want to make it happen.

Very specifically part of our mission is to promote the work of artists who are under-recognized and women artists. So we always have at least 60 percent, usually much more than 60 percent of women artists in our exhibitions, in our solo shows and in our studio program.

**Revolution:** Any last things you'd like to say, in general or about this show?

**Kathleen Gilrain:** Well, just to say, come to the show, and come to some of the events because that's when there will be the most people here and conversations can happen. The idea is that we want to get conversations going between people who are interested in changing the trajectory. You will find people here to talk to and continue the conversation.