Artist Statement, Sam Durant, 5/27/2017

Let me begin by describing the sculpture that has become the focus of protest in recent days as I envisioned it when it was first exhibited in 2012 in Europe. Scaffold opens the difficult histories of the racial dimension of the criminal justice system in the United States, ranging from lynchings to mass incarceration to capital punishment. In bringing these troubled and complex histories of national importance to the fore, it was my intention not to cause pain or suffering, but to speak against the continued marginalization of these stories and peoples, and to build awareness around their significance.

Scaffold seeks to address the contemporary relevance and resonance of these narratives today, especially at a time of continued institutionalized racism, and the ongoing dehumanization and intimidation of people of color. Scaffold is neither memorial nor monument, and stands against prevailing ideas and normative history. It warns against forgetting the past. In doing so, my hope for Scaffold is to offer a platform for open dialogue and exchange, a place to question not only our past, but the future we form together.

I made Scaffold as a learning space for people like me, white people who have not suffered the effects of a white supremacist society and who may not consciously know that it exists. It has been my belief that white artists need to address issues of white supremacy and its institutional manifestations. Whites created the concept of race and have used it to maintain dominance for centuries, whites must be involved in its dismantling. However, your protests have shown me that I made a grave miscalculation in how my work can be received by those in a particular community. In focusing on my position as a white artist making work for that audience I failed to understand what the inclusion of the Dakota 38 in the sculpture could mean for Dakota people. I offer my deepest apologies for my thoughtlessness. I should have reached out to the Dakota community the moment I knew that the sculpture would be exhibited at the Walker Art Center in proximity to Mankato.
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. In my attempt to raise awareness I have learned something profound and I thank you for that. Can this be a learning experience for all of us, the Walker, other institutions and artists and larger society? I am open and ready to work together with you.