

HYPERALLERGIC

News

Artists and Drug Policy Activists Protest FDA's Role in Opioid Crisis

Nan Goldin was among the artist-activists who gathered in Washington, DC to demand the FDA address the “public health impact of the opioid crisis.”

Jasmine Weber April 8, 2019



Dozens of protesters were present to urge the FDA to reform (all photos by Sean O'Donnell)

On the morning of Friday, April 5, a group of passionate drug policy advocates, artists, and emboldened supporters gathered in front of the Department of

Health and Human Services (HHS) in Washington, DC for a die-in and guerrilla art installation. The organizers of the demonstration were from drug advocacy organizations including Recovery Reform NOW, PAIN Sackler, Team Sharing, and the Opioid Spoon Project.

At the protest, participants held posters memorializing loved ones who lost their lives in the opioid epidemic, and carried signs reading “FDA Approved Deaths” and “FDA Protects Big Pharma Not Us.”

Near the entryway of the building, they planted a massive opioid spoon sculpture, the brainchild of artist-activist Domenic Esposito, branded with the logo of the Food and Drug Administration. Esposito and the non-profit Opioid Spoon Project have dropped multiple iterations of these 10.5-foot long, 800-pound heavy “Opioid Spoon Deployments” at various locations including Purdue Pharma and Rhodes Pharma, drug manufacturing companies owned by the art philanthropist Sackler family.

“The spoon sculpture — engraved with the FDA’s logo — signifies the responsibility the FDA bears in first causing and now fixing this urgent national health crisis,” Esposito said in a statement regarding Friday’s protest. “We deliver customized spoon sculptures to show those responsible that the recovery community and the general public are watching and will not rest until everyone steps up and cooperates in ending this crisis.”

Protesters called on the FDA to make tangible reforms to federal drug policy to support those affected by the opioid epidemic

On the morning of the protest, organization Wake Up FDA published a public letter to Donald Trump and HHS Secretary Alex Azar, urging the political figures to pivot the FDA towards recovery through the nomination of a “new commissioner who understands recovery and the FDA’s role in addressing the public health impact of the opioid crisis.”

“In November 2018,” the letter writes, “the FDA approved a form of sufentanil, the most potent opioid on the market, despite criticism and outrage from advocates, providers and policymakers. [...] Currently, there are eight times more opioid painkillers available to patients than there are recovery medications. When we put this in context of the decisions the FDA has made over the last six months, it’s clearly time to hold the FDA accountable.”

“Defying recommendations from its own advisory board members and other experts, the FDA continues to approve dangerous opioids that will wind up diverted while limiting access to recovery medications that would fill gaps in care,” said Wake Up FDA spokesperson and recovery activist Ryan Hampton. “We demand transparency and accountability, and we call on the FDA to address the opioid crisis with the urgency it deserves.”

One of the participating activists was Nan Goldin, renowned photographer and founder of PAIN (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now) Sackler, an advocacy organization which primarily raises awareness about the Sackler family and their prominence in cultural institutions. The organization demands “all museums, universities, and educational institutions worldwide remove Sackler signage and publicly refuse future funding from the Sacklers.”

In recent months, PAIN Sackler’s impact on the art world has been enormous. In February, Goldin declared that she would boycott the National Portrait Gallery in the UK if they chose to accept a £1 million (~\$1.3 million) donation from the Sacklers. In March, the institution chose to decline the funding, and Tate announced its museums would no longer accept Sackler funding. Shortly after, in the wake of a PAIN protest at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Metropolitan Museum of Art, Guggenheim announced it would no longer accept funding from the Sacklers.

“We will continue to show up and hold everyone who is complicit in the opioid crisis accountable,” Goldin said in a statement. “We will continue to call out those who must do more to address this suffering. Today, it’s the FDA. We will continue to put pressure on the FDA until they meet our demands.”



Protesters laid on the ground, surrounded by empty pill bottles, as part of the die-in



Participants remembered their loved ones with dedicated signs