

Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest

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INTRODUCTION

We are living in an age of protest. Around the globe, radical movements, from prison and debt abolition to Extinction Rebellion's climate activism, have penetrated mainstream discourse. Culture and art have, necessarily, also come under fire. While art has enormous potential to shift society, the institutions upon which it relies help hold systems of power in place. As much as I love museums and have dedicated my career to them, they are repositories of cultural hegemony, mirrors of society's ills, from enormous wealth gaps and other legacies of colonialism to the exclusion of historically marginalized groups. Museums and cultural spaces are part of the systems that protests hope to undo. I believe this undoing and redoing can not only make museums better for more people, but also map ways to make change in society at large.

My most recent experiences as the director of the Queens Museum, by turns exhilarating, challenging to my core, and heartbreaking, are central to this thinking. I led the museum for three extraordinary years through moments that proved to be highpoints of my professional life, and others that threatened to thwart my deeply held convictions of art and culture's vital engagement in societal change. A public museum, it is situated within a public park, in one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse geographies on the planet. In a city of immigrants, Queens, host to New York City's two airports, is the place most newcomers arrive. Many stay in the string of neighborhoods along the 7 train, the borough's spine, which transports a population that speaks over 138 different languages and dialects. Each subway stop opens doors into different cultures. And yet, we are all New Yorkers.

In awe of these realities, I took up my post at the Queens Museum in January 2015. Just eighteen months later, the election of Donald Trump would dramatically shift the landscape in which I worked. While the museum remained on an upward

trajectory of increased attention, support, and visibility, the results of the election deeply impacted the staff and our publics and collaborators surrounding the Museum. Over a decade before I arrived at the Queens Museum, community organizers had been hired in a brilliant move to connect with nearby immigrant communities. Led initially by Jaishri Abichandani, and then by Prerana Reddy, this organizing effort created a new model for how museums could engage with their publics. The goal was not just to bring people to the museum, but rather to leverage its resources to surface and enact desires of these communities via cultural organizing.¹

In the aftermath of the election on November 8, 2016, the Trump administration's policies and rhetoric unleashed a Pandora's box of hate, and one of its primary targets was immigrants. At this museum these conditions were no mere abstraction, but an all-too-harsh reality. Five percent of the Queens Museum's staff received Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) protections, President Obama's executive order that provided legal status to many people brought to the United States without documents as children. This group heard Donald Trump's promises to repeal DACA, without which they would risk losing temporary relief from legal uncertainty, or even face deportation to countries they had never visited.

Further, in the weeks following the election, many of the people with whom the museum's staff had collaborated for more than a decade and a half – through its free family programs; the New New Yorkers art classes taught in over a dozen languages; gatherings and classes at Immigrant Movement International in Corona, Queens; and other long term partnerships –² now feared leaving their homes and even sending their children to school.³ Whether or not the participants in these programs possessed documentation, there was worry of being caught up in a raid or being in the “wrong place at the wrong time.” I started getting Facebook alerts from various local groups spreading news of

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) being at one or another subway stop, or heading to a particular neighborhood. Some even claimed that the alerts themselves were fake, sent out on social media to stir further anxiety and fear. City council members planned special sessions to reassure their constituents, and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio convened a town hall in Corona with then-council member Julissa Ferreras Copeland, along with a cadre of city agency heads and local uniformed police, to reassure immigrants that we were “all New Yorkers” no matter immigration status, and that local police forces and the educational system should be seen as allies.

In this climate, at the museum, we started holding weekly all-staff meetings. We contacted immigrant rights groups to be sure to stay updated on any changes in policy (whether local or federal) and shared this information with our networks; we coordinated with city agencies to be sure our staff and publics could access important information about their rights; we assembled a list of the museum’s resources that could be lent to local groups; and we decided to join the art strike called for Inauguration Day.

On January 20, 2017, while the Queens Museum was closed to regular operations, the staff created a program that invited the public to work with a printmaking collective on creating posters, buttons, and other ephemera for the coming protests. Over 300 people gathered in the atrium that day. I was deeply moved by this gathering of retired school teachers, artists, students, and local moms and grandmas. Throughout the day several in attendance thanked us for creating a space to gather on a day they felt so vulnerable. On that rainy day, it never would have crossed my mind that just over a year later I would resign my post.

What happened over the following twelve months would prove immensely complex. Several trustees did not like the fact that we were joining the Inauguration Day strike. Their position

was that we should continue to do the work we had always done, but to do it quietly. At least one trustee expressed a fear of retribution from Trump via punitive tax audits of board members. From my perspective, not only had the political environment created a predicament in managing a staff with a significant number of increasingly precarious immigrants; I also felt strongly that we needed to be forthright and direct in our support for the communities with whom we had built a great deal over the years. Trust was at issue.

The staff and I drafted a restatement of values, which we felt would be an important buttress of our work. This took the form of a letter “from the director” that we posted to the museum’s website. I presented the values statement at the next board meeting, where it was unanimously approved. The statement, since removed, included the following:

The Queens Museum asserts a deep commitment to freedom of expression, and intentionally supports and celebrates difference and multiplicity as fundamental to our collective liberation. We believe that art can shift the ways in which we experience our world, and therefore art, artists, and cultural institutions have a powerful role to play in society.

Therefore, the Queens Museum:

- advocates for art as a tool for positive social change, critical thinking, discussion and debate, discovery and imagination, and to make visible multiple histories and realities;*
- supports and initiates projects and programs that are inspired by actively listening to the needs and aspirations of the communities we serve and consider to be our valued partners;*
- works to engender respect for a diversity of cultures, broaden access to ideas and art, and connect the public to*

*opportunities for civic agency;
- uses our resources – human, financial, environmental,
and beyond – to create greater equity, inclusiveness, and
sustainability, both within our institution and in the
broader society.*

Outside of the Queens Museum, artists, art workers, curators, professors, and others started organizing with, as one Google group's name made clear, a Sense of Emergency. Around this time, New York's Museum of Modern Art installed an exhibition of art from their collection by artists who would no longer be welcomed into the United States due to the Trump administration's so-called Muslim ban. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum submitted amicus briefs to the Supreme Court to overturn the ban, which were cosigned by the Association of Art Museum Directors, the American Association of Museums, and more than one hundred museums all over the United States.⁴ Smaller organizations were doing whatever they could.

From the Sense of Emergency cohort, a new working group formed calling ourselves Art Space Sanctuary. The group was headed by Abou Farman, an artist and professor of anthropology at the New School, as well as a dedicated immigration rights activist. We looked to the sanctuary movement of the 1980s in Latin America, largely carried out by clergy members committed to liberation theology and using churches to shelter people fleeing violence, and the New Sanctuary movement of the 2000s, spearheaded by an interfaith group of leaders in the United States seeking justice for migrants and immigrants.

We thought that Art Space Sanctuary could communicate that cultural spaces were, in fact, for everyone, and that within these spaces there could be ways of conveying care and support. The Queens Museum had a long history of collaboration with frontline organizations, including the immigrant advocacy

group Make the Road, and addiction support group Drogadictos Anónimos, and among others. The idea was to create a series of protocols that would allow museums and cultural spaces to make connections between audiences and these organizations so that we could support vulnerable populations. I strongly believed that the Queens Museum would be an ideal organization to embrace this concept given our long-term relationships and the extant programming of the museum. We hoped to gather a critical mass of cultural organizations that would become Art Space Sanctuaries by agreeing to the guidelines Farman had developed and made public on a website.⁵ This, we hoped, would signal the cultural sector's support for the vulnerable people who worked in the museum as well as visited. The guidelines were flexible, and given that the Queens Museum already had relationships with many frontline groups, it made sense for us to sign on. Buoyed by the enthusiastic support of a few trustees, I presented it at our next board meeting.

The response was profoundly disappointing. A handful of board members thought the idea completely untenable, expressing fears that the notion of cultural sanctuary would turn the museum into a place for people “to hide out or sleep,” a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept. With outspoken opposition to the initiative, it was impossible to move it forward. Moreover, the rhetoric of the rejection was grounded in the notion that as a public institution we should not, and indeed could not, “take sides” in the political debates around immigration: we had to repudiate a pro-immigrant initiative like Art Space Sanctuary in order to maintain a supposedly “neutral” position. It was demoralizing.

The situation was further complicated in June 2017 when the Mission of Israel to the United Nations contacted the museum about renting the galleries to hold an anniversary event for the historic vote that paved the way for the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. The Queens Museum's physical building

was an appealing location for the event because it was where the UN General Assembly met from 1946 to 1950, prior to the museum's existence. Their proposal was to reenact the vote that took place on November 27, 1947; then-vice president Mike Pence was to be their keynote speaker, addressing hundreds of invited guests.

I felt deeply uncomfortable with this space rental proposal. Typically, rentals of the museum were for weddings, bar mitzvahs, and other types of celebrations; this was a very different kind of event. Not only was I gravely concerned about the operational impacts of an event of this scale, as well as its security implications; the mission's confirmation of the vice president of the United States attendance more than four months strongly suggested the political nature of the proposed event. With its government sponsorship and roster of politicians speaking and attending, I believed this was an event engineered to support the views of particular government aims, and that this violated what had been a long-standing practice – and at the time, I believed, a policy – of not renting space for such political events. Recognizing the unique character of this proposed rental, the matter was escalated to the board for consideration. I recommended against hosting the event, but the decision was ultimately up to the trustees.

After much debate, the board decided to decline the Mission of Israel's proposed event. Two days later an article appeared in the *Jerusalem Post* stating that I was “anti-Israel” because I had edited a book about cultural resistance that contained a section about BDS, the movement inspired by Palestinian civil society's call to boycott, divest from, and sanction Israel. The article was highly critical of me for my supposed canceling of the event. A New York City Council member called for my dismissal and started seeking support for a petition, and the *New York Post* piled on with additional criticism. The board then reacted with great speed, reinstating the event it had days earlier rejected. No

public statement corrected the misperception that the initial decision was mine.

I found myself under an avalanche of hate for alleged anti-Semitism. In the aftermath of these articles, I felt I had to prove to board members, never mind the online universe that was now propelling vitriol at me at staggering speed, that I was indeed not an anti-Semite. My Jewish husband counseled me to talk publicly about his family's history, to relay that his grandparents were Auschwitz survivors, that our son had a bris, and that my grandmother had helped Jewish men escape across the border of fascist Italy during World War II. It felt horrible to trot out these facts about my existence in the effort to convince people who had known me for years that I did not hate people for their cultural or religious backgrounds.

Meanwhile, the work of the Queens Museum was garnering broader acknowledgment by the public. It was particularly encouraging when the *New York Times* profiled my work at the museum.⁶ We had just opened a series of successful exhibitions, among them *Never Built New York*, which featured an array of architectural projects planned but never realized that made unique use of the Panorama – a 10,000-square-foot model of every building in New York City's five boroughs that is a centerpiece of the museum's collection. I was also deep into planning a major exhibition of artist Mel Chin's work (which I would cocurate with Manon Slome and the nonprofit arts organization No Longer Empty) that would fill the entire museum, with major projects that would spill into various public sites throughout New York City. Additionally, we had recently received significant grants from prestigious foundations. With these promising fundraising results, we had achieved a financial milestone toward which I had been working since my first days at the museum. There was a lot to be proud of for everyone associated with the museum.

Nonetheless, as fall unfurled and the Mission of Israel's

event took place at the museum, the politics of the event became clearer. At the November 28 event, Pence delivered his speech as planned, which went far beyond a celebration of Israel's anniversary: it turned out to be a forty-five-minute policy speech previewing the Trump administration's intent to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Trump made his public announcement of the move from the White House just a week later,⁷ and in the days that followed, protest led to violence in Jerusalem and criticism from many US allies and the United Nations. Against precedent, the Queens Museum's building had been used as the backdrop for an announcement of a major shift in US foreign policy.

As fall stretched into winter, I could tell that a small group of board members were unhappy with my leadership, particularly around my recommendations that we participate in the Art Space Sanctuary initiative and decline the Mission of Israel's event. The job of the director is difficult enough without this kind of doubt from a board, and after a grueling year-end, I decided in late January 2018 to resign. It broke my heart to come to this conclusion because I knew I had so much more to contribute to the museum and its publics.

There were a few board members who did not like that I was determined the museum should take a position on events that deeply impacted our staff and surrounding communities via our operations. I believed that as a cultural space reflecting our collective values that we could not remain "neutral," especially as the very foundations of democracy seemed to be crumbling around us. Neutrality, in fact, is not at all neutral; rather, to paraphrase the South African anti-apartheid leader Desmond Tutu, it is a position in and of itself that supports the status quo. And given how the museum had always known the realities that confronted us could not be met with indifference.

Since my departure from the Queens Museum, I have been contemplating the history of how museums came to be in the United States, and how they operate today, particularly in the ways their modes of storytelling embody specific politics and how we might understand their connection to a whole matrix of power relations and ideologies. Amid calls for diversity, equity, and inclusion in our spaces of culture, there is no way around a confrontation with neutrality as a persistent ideology within the museum. In a sense, it is the expertise of the museum that makes it trustworthy; that it selects art and makes exhibitions that are educational, that instruct its publics. However, there are many structures, from operations and governance, to curatorial choices, and the treatment of staff, that undergird these selections, and the ways in which they are presented and interpreted by the museum, that are directly oppositional to any desire for diversity and inclusion. The problem lies in the fact that these structures are unseen and unregistered, and that they undeniably privilege those of specific class, race, educational, and social backgrounds. If we truly want to undo barriers to inclusion, we must face this false neutrality and dismantle it.

Further, the problem with neutrality as a claim for a museum is that it fundamentally neutralizes any criticism, dissent, or alternate history that it might present, which contradicts its very claims to education and free and open exchanges of ideas, as we will see enacted in forthcoming chapters. Neutrality, in effect, results in the disenfranchisement of artists or publics that may engage in debate within its walls because the institutions' very power structures, historically and operationally, nullify concepts of civics to maintain a neutral position. This manifestation of "neutrality" requires that both sides of any debate are equally strong, or must be equally represented. This simply doesn't measure up in reality.

According to the American Alliance of Museums, “museums are considered the most trustworthy source of information in America, rated higher than local papers, nonprofits researchers, the US government, or academic researchers.”⁸ But they are also places of profound alienation. Their typically grand architectures have served many purposes beyond the “simple” task of containing and ensuring the safety of artworks. These include signaling the importance of art and culture in a society; the colonial might of a nation; the generosity and largesse of major arts patrons; and, perhaps most tellingly, the tastes of the patrons who founded the institution or provided its foundational collections and objects. And even still, there is a common misperception of what non-profit, tax-exempt status means, particularly as it pertains to remaining “neutral”; it is consistently held, by trustees and staff alike, that there are limits on what kinds of opinions institutions might express in order to protect their tax-exempt status. In fact, there are only two things that by statute non-profits may not do without jeopardizing their status: 1) they may not campaign or lobby for or against an individual candidate for office, and 2) they may not campaign for or against a particular piece of legislation.⁹

Over the past several years, protests have erupted regularly around how museums are funded, how they are organized, what they show and how, who holds power within their structures, and how they reflect, or fail to reflect, a whole diversity of identities. In this book I examine examples of these protests or calls for accountability in order to delve into both the histories of museums and cultural institutions in the United States, and the useful lessons that might emerge; these constitute fascinating and revealing entry points to the manifestation of coloniality, white supremacy, class bias, and innumerable other social dimensions that persist and are contested today.

As publics increase their demands for greater agency, inclusion, and diversity, cultural spaces must examine their own

ways of being in order to remain relevant. I believe that to address the inequities that continue to haunt our institutions, and indeed society, we could not find a better place to begin than by dismantling the myth of neutrality in our cultural spaces.

You might be thinking that everyone knows there is no such thing as a neutral space. However, the idea of neutrality manifests within cultural organizations in surprising ways. Consider this: with a membership of over 40,000 people and organizations, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) bears considerable weight in its areas of expertise. Founded in 1946, for nearly fifty years the organization has defined the museum as “a nonprofit institution” that “acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment.”¹⁰ Recently, however, a group of ICOM members decided to revisit this definition, as museums as “democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures” that “safeguard memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.” The proposed language goes on to say that museums aim to “contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary well-being.”¹¹

In mid August 2019, backlash against the new proposal culminated with its dismissal as “ideological” by more than twenty-four of ICOM’s country branches, including France, Italy, Spain, and Russia. While such disputes over the definitions of long-standing institutions are not rare, in this case it is noteworthy that the branches framed their objections in terms of the “ideology” the new language signaled; the implication is that the previous definition was *not* ideological, and by extension that the activities of museums proceed from a “neutral” space.

This question of whether museums are neutral, then, is the crux of a contemporary conundrum about how stories have

been told, who has told them, why and how they have been framed and historicized, and what it means that foundational stories are being challenged today by a whole diversity of perspectives. The people who hold these diverse perspectives, it must be noted, have been marginalized from society for their race, gender identity, class, educational levels, ability, etc., throughout many decades. Since museums are the West's mode of preserving history, we then must ask, has the museum ever really been a neutral space? Has it not always had an agenda in its formulation? Is this necessarily always a bad thing? Especially if those agendas include things like "human dignity" and "planetary wellbeing," which are clearly positive aims? There seems to be widespread discomfort around these ideas, as well as fear that cultural institutions and museums will somehow be reduced if their founding biases are made visible. It is my contention that these biases exist throughout human culture, and that we must, at minimum, see them and confront the intended and unintended consequences of this very human condition.

At a moment in human history when we must contemplate our own potential extinction due to extreme climate conditions we have brought about, and when nationalism has risen and xenophobia internationally has reared its head yet again in increasingly virulent and violent ways, how does culture respond? And how do museums remain relevant in such times, especially when various publics and foundations are calling on museums to be publicly accountable for the ways in which they make decisions and for the ways they work? It is in this context, and at this urgent moment, that I believe we must be able to identify the biases of our museums, to understand the worldviews they both promote and marginalize, and to interrogate these ways of being, working, organizing, and making culture.

I approach this project with a great deal of love for museums, especially the ones that I address specifically. They are struggling

to change and reflect our highest social ideals, just as they confront their own blind spots and failures. We must identify why and how we are failing, and fully embrace these failures as the starting point for reimagining the museum – but that is just the beginning. Art workers of all stripes are dedicated to shifting the practices of our institutions, and I hope to give their hard work the credit it deserves. They, more than anyone, know how much has been accomplished, yet how much further our museums and cultural institutions must go to create a truly accessible, participatory cultural commons.

Through a close look at recent controversies around culture, from the swirl of revelations about where the Sackler family's fortune was made, to the latest COVID-19-era demands for unionization and equity, I look at how neutrality, in all of its institutional guises, manifests itself in the presentation of art, its selection and collecting, the public relations undertaken to shape messaging, where the funds come from to pay for culture, how these systems are governed, and who and how the operations of museums support systems of power.

This book not only offers analyses of the sometimes-obscured problematics of museums, but also points toward some ways they can be better for more people – questions I approach through speculative thought, including on how we might act collectively to achieve these important transformations in the cultural field. Via these two sides of the same coin, I hope that with some care and patience, as well as some fortitude, we might look deeply at what can and should shift, and then imagine how.

REVELATIONS

Sitting in the Bartos Theatre at New York's Museum of Modern Art in November of 2018, I was waiting for curator Paola Antonelli to kick off one of her "R&D Salons," which bring together artists, scientists, activists, experts, and various other

creative minds to think through thorny questions of our times. Salon twenty-nine was titled “Dependency” and featured a fascinating lineup from artist and disability activist Park McArthur to counter-anthropologist Gina Athena Ulysse, who made her presentation, in part, through song. It was to be capped off by artist Nan Goldin, known for her intimate photographic work, particularly a tender and brutally straightforward series of portraits from the early 1980s titled *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*.

Goldin took the stage and her voice began to quiver. She was quickly overcome by emotion – she was making a presentation not about her artwork, but about the activist group PAIN (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), which she had founded following her recovery from addiction to the powerful opiate painkiller OxyContin.

PAIN’s stated mission is quite specific: to publicize the troubling links between the pharmaceutical’s production and the philanthropic Sackler family, whose name is deeply imbricated with art museums the world over. As Goldin explained at a later protest in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in March 2019, “We’re here to call out the Sackler family, who has become synonymous with the opioid crisis,” gesturing to fellow activists who held aloft signs and banner that read “We’re here to call out the museums who allow the Sackler name to line their halls, tarnish their wings, to honor the family who made billions off the bodies of hundreds of thousands.”¹²

The Sackler name has been inextricably tied to art and philanthropy for decades; indeed, their largesse has been likened to that of the Medicis for their provision of major funding to museums, from the Met and the Guggenheim in New York to the UK’s Tate Modern and National Portrait Gallery, and the Louvre’s Sackler Wing in Paris. And yet the money that enables this generosity, or at least a big chunk of it, comes from what we now know is a very dark place.

One arm of the family, until early 2019, was intrinsically involved with the running of Purdue Pharma, the maker and mass marketer of OxyContin. Though originally presented as nonaddictive and safe, this extended-release version of oxycodone, a drug 50 percent stronger than morphine, has proven to be incredibly addictive and highly potent.¹⁵ After years of misinformation and marketing to doctors as an addiction-resistant panacea for all manner of persistent pain, the drug, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Oxycontin contributed to over 200,000 deaths caused by opioid overdose in the United States since 1999.¹⁴

The namesake of the Washington, DC, gallery to which he donated \$4 million in construction funds and over 1,000 precious objects of Asian Art, Arthur M. Sackler, along with his brothers, Mortimer and Raymond, was trained as a doctor. Arthur was also an entrepreneur and successful advertising executive who saw the potential for direct marketing to doctors as a way to exponentially increase sales. In 1952, the three brothers purchased a small company called Purdue Frederick, which over time evolved into Purdue Pharma. By the 1960s, the firm had grown into one of the leading purveyors of tranquilizers, and Arthur Sackler made a fortune marketing them. He simultaneously ran an advertising company and a journal for doctors, which proved to be an effective way to boost sales. Sackler was also known to have bribed a Food and Drug Administration chief to promote certain drugs.¹⁵ When he died in 1987, Raymond and Mortimer bought out Arthur's descendants' stakes in Purdue. While all of the Sacklers certainly became wealthy before 1987, Purdue Pharma would soon be yielding profits that made their prior fortune pale in comparison.

Purdue's most successful drug during the 1980s was MS Contin, a timerelease morphine pill that allowed patients to experience relief from pain over many hours. However, by the time of Arthur's death, the patent was running out and generics

would soon take its place. As often happens in the pharmaceutical industry, Purdue sought to improve the formula so as to continue to reap high margins on sales under a new patent. The result was OxyContin, which Mortimer and Raymond Sackler rolled out in 1996 “with one of the biggest pharmaceutical marketing campaigns in history, deploying persuasive techniques pioneered by Arthur.”¹⁶ Their formulations provided small dosages as well as mega-pills that vastly exceeded the potency of other opiate pills on the market. As Barry Meier, *New York Times* reporter and author of the 2003 *Pain Killer*, put it, “In terms of narcotic fire-power, OxyContin was a nuclear weapon.”¹⁷

Between 1996 and 2017, the use of OxyContin (and its generic, instant-release version, oxycodone) skyrocketed, making billions in revenue for the Sacklers still affiliated with Purdue Pharma and cultivating a generation of addicts and their untimely overdose deaths. How did this medication get so popular so fast? The fact of the matter is that the Sacklers were following a model they had been for more than a half century: aggressive marketing, directly and relentlessly targeting doctors to prescribe OxyContin not only for acute pain that might follow surgery but also for long-term chronic pain. Further, Purdue not only worked doggedly to destigmatize significant medical hesitancy to prescribe opiates, but it also capitalized on a misconception among doctors that “oxycodone was less potent than morphine.”¹⁸

By 2005 several states had brought suits against the makers and marketers of oxycodone over their roles in myriad overdose deaths, including Purdue Pharma and members of the Sackler family. While the legal battles had only just begun, the fact remained that the billions in revenue from these drug sales has made this family one of the wealthiest on the planet. Of course, the Sacklers are also a major donor to the arts. At the time, the Sackler name remained on the walls of some of the world’s most august cultural institutions, and these institutions were caught

in a double bind: Should they continue to be grateful for financial largesse that fundamentally supports their work while acknowledging the deep ethical problems in using such funds to support cultural endeavors?

Given Goldin's status as a highly collectible artist whose work is desired by and represented in nearly all major museum photography collections, she saw an opportunity to use her leverage to make change. In 2018, she and a group of supporters kicked off the PAIN protests by dumping hundreds of "prescription bottles" of OxyContin into the reflecting pool at the Met's Temple of Dendur, an iconic ancient Egyptian structure located in the wing that bears the Sackler name. Then at the Guggenheim in 2019, on whose board Mortimer D.A. Sackler sat until 2018, and whose education center was named for the family in 2001, Goldin staged a theatrical and impactful "die-in." Hundreds of "prescription slips" for OxyContin were dropped from the upper ramparts of the museum's famous spiral, which floated down on a crowd lying on the floor of the rotunda chanting "Shame on Sackler." Meanwhile, large banners unfurled over the railings of the ramp declared "Take Down Their Name" and "200 Dead Each Day."¹⁹

While these were surely powerful symbolic gestures, it wasn't clear if anything would, in fact, shift. Even if public pressure were exerted on these eminent institutions, their relationships with donors often went back decades, and museums rely heavily on private philanthropy to make possible not only maintenance of current collections and facilities, but also day-to-day operations and temporary exhibitions, not to mention future growth.

Then came March 2019. The National Portrait Gallery in London declared that it would not accept a gift of \$1.3 million from the Sackler Trust. Why did they make this decision? Because Nan Goldin had told the *Observer* she was in discussions

with the gallery about a retrospective, which she would refuse if they continued to accept Sackler funds.²⁰ In short succession, Tate, the Met, and the Guggenheim followed suit, each stating in their own way that they would not take future gifts from the family. Each noted that while the Sackler's past generosity was laudable, current lawsuits and revelations about the family's involvement in this health crisis made it problematic to accept new gifts. Many of the Sackler foundations simultaneously announced they would suspend any future gifts.

Then in July 2019, the Louvre announced it would remove the Sackler name from the galleries named in the family's honor.²¹ The announcement stated that there was a twenty-year concession on the naming and, since that initial period had lapsed two years prior, that the Sackler name was due for retirement. While the Louvre did not identify ongoing international protests by Goldin and PAIN as the reason for its decision, it is worth noting that the Louvre announcement followed another round of PAIN protests on July 1 in Paris. Following these events, under ongoing pressure from PAIN, schools like Tufts University took the Sackler name from their walls, and NYU's Langone Medical Center decided to take no further funding from the family.²²

In the midst of this distancing, however, fears within museums were rising that similar scrutiny might be applied to other donors, prompting Daniel Weiss, president of the Met, to state, "We are not a partisan organization, we are not a political organization, so we don't have a litmus test for whom we take gifts from based on policies or politics. If there are people who want to support us, for the most part we are delighted."²³ The concern was that if wealthy people felt they might have to undergo some kind of vetting, it would debilitate cultural organizations from raising funds. The museum felt it had to continue to declare its neutrality, even as it was being forced to radically shift its relationship with a major, longtime donor.

This wasn't the first time the Met had rejected taking funds from a nowunsavory source. In the early fall of 2018, I received an email from the Met's Department of Islamic Art inviting me to a small discussion at the museum in late October, which was supported at least in part by funds from the Saudi government. About two weeks later, on October 2, Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudi dissenter and columnist for the *Washington Post*, was brutally murdered and dismembered in Istanbul. Over the ensuing weeks, it became increasingly clear that the Saudi royal family was likely to be involved in the crime.

On the morning of October 18, I received the following deceptively anodyne email:

Dear Colleague:

We want to thank you for your upcoming participation in "Collecting and Exhibiting the Middle East." It is our pleasure to host this small invitation-only scholarly seminar on how encyclopedic museums collect and exhibit modern art from the Middle East. This is an important conversation and core to our work as a global institution at The Met, as it is for each of the participants. While this conversation and a subsequent public colloquium were to be supported by external funds, in light of recent developments we have decided that the Museum will itself fund this event.

*Again, we look forward to seeing you next week,
Dan Weiss*

That same morning, it was announced in the *New York Times* that both the Brooklyn Museum and the Met would be returning funds from the Saudi regime for upcoming programs.²⁴ Divestment from these funds made an important statement about the non-neutrality of the sources of these funds. Indeed, the museums could not possibly claim Saudi support could be neutral

following Kashoggi's murder.

When two major New York City museums divest of funds from a particular donor, it is an acknowledgement that money is not neutral, and that there are limits to the kinds of support a cultural space will accept if they contradict the stated values of the museum. And while there are certainly very real, material differences between the Saudi Royal Family and Sackler situations, in a cultural moment that has brought scrutiny on many aspects of society, the museum and cultural world seems more connected than ever to international, national, and local events. But how exactly did we get here? Why has this moment of seeming accountability arrived? And what does it mean for the ways in which museums currently operate? How does the myth of neutrality manifest within our cultural spaces, and why is it so problematic? To get deeper, we need to understand the nuances of neutrality more expansively, as well as how cultural spaces have evolved over time.

Vasif Kortun, a Turkish writer, curator, and educator now at the helm of the Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture and formerly director of research and programs at SALT Istanbul, speaks of the time registers in which cultural space must operate. He writes:

It is essential to recognize that institutions exist in three different times concurrently. Exhibitions perform in the "present time." Meanwhile the institution is a heritage machine bearing and asking questions around unresolved, ignored, absented and obscured stories from the past, and also negotiating, fermenting, testing out, in the best case, possible futures. Museums' mandates used to be clear: to do everything in their capacity to advocate a better world than the one received ... The "better" is unambiguous ... To support, cherish and voice these rights is not becoming political in a narrow sense of the word. It is simple decency.²⁵

These different time frames that Kortun references require an understanding of the ways in which cultural institutions in the United States came to be, and how their evolution from European models embody ideologies from both continents.

Having emerged during Europe's eighteenth-century colonial expansion into North America, cultural institutions in the United States reflect some of the values, forms, and power structures of their forebears. The European museum, from its roots in Hellenic Alexandria, through to Renaissance Europe and the Enlightenment, was driven by a desire to bring objects and learning together in space. Whether initiated by wealthy patrons, royalty, or the church, European collections and their display invariably signaled particular interests, ideals, ideology, and tastes, as well as wealth and power. The presentation of these objects and their messages ranged widely, from the cabinets of curiosities assembled by prolific collectors of "strange" objects, to the church's drive to convey the stories and lessons of its doctrines via stained glass, paintings, frescoes, and cathedral architecture, to monarchs commissioning and displaying art in grand style to reinforce their authority, wealth, and influence, to the newly minted European bourgeoisie's use of portraiture as a way to signal their social and economic status. The Western meaning of art and its display has long been equally as violent and layered as the subject and form of the artwork itself.

While Enlightenment ideologies brought notions of society's improvement through science and art, it was not until the French Revolution that the Louvre Museum became public in the way we imagine museums today. In 1793, it was declared that the collections that had heretofore belonged to the king of France were now the property of the French people. In keeping with the revolution's ideals of liberty, equality, and brotherhood, the Louvre was not only opened to the people of the republic, but it also served as a symbol of the new democratic order. As

two prominent museum historians noted, “In the ten-day period that had replaced the week, the museum reserved five days for artists and copyists, two for cleaning, and three for the general public. So popular were the public days that the crowds of visitors attracted swarms of enterprising prostitutes.”²⁶ Not only were the collections owned by the people, but they also existed for their entertainment and enjoyment.

The European museum also served as a symbol of national power, as the Louvre did ostentatiously during Napoleon’s rule. Until his defeat at Waterloo in 1815, it was the repository for the spoils of his colonial conquests and aggressions in the form of art looted from Italy to Egypt. While some number of these objects were returned upon his defeat, a significant portion remain in France, providing physical evidence, and continuation of, historical conquest. For example, the Quai Branly–Jacques Chirac Museum in Paris “holds nearly 80 percent of the works of African art in French public collections, around 70,000 pieces in total.”²⁷ Beyond France, European nations’ colonial projects brought looted objects and artworks into European museums in vast numbers. Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum, for instance, holds about 4,000 objects whose provenance is traced to the Netherlands’ colonial period in South and Southeast Asia.²⁸

In the mid eighteenth century, the European museum was still evolving into the form we see articulated today. This time period saw a major shift in the classification and organization of European collections, which in turn signaled a new pedagogy of museums: “The previous arrangement had been based on a comparison of the aesthetic qualities of paintings, but the new system aimed to teach visitors about the history of art based on a series of great masters and regional traditions rather than based on the artistic quality of the works.”²⁹ This revised emphasis on the educational aspect of the artworks on display, rather than the pleasure delivered by their aesthetics, has not

only played an essential role in the evolution of museums intercontinentally over subsequent centuries; it has also served to cement ideas about the public's relationship to these institutions, as seen today in widespread notions that art is a public or common good, regardless of the funding structure that underlies its presentation.

The Enlightenment period, with its commitments to individualism, reason, and the separation of church and state, is perhaps equal only to modernism in its impact on museums and cultural institutions. In fact, the Enlightenment idea of universal man, and subsequent reification via modernism, lies at the core of the emergence of the myth of neutrality in museums. I've been in an ongoing conversation with Charles Esche, director of the Van Abbe museum in the Netherlands, about the ways that ideas of "universal" knowledge relate to art. During one of our discussions in 2018 Esche said, "in this model of an international and universal museum that we are talking about ... you can walk into a museum and inhabit a universal identity. The universal identity can work up until a point, until some aspect of your own identity, and its relationship to the objects on view, suddenly leaps up and slaps you in the face."³⁰ The idea behind this kind of museum is, at least in part, that we all come from the family of humanity, and that there are commonalities and resonances that run through culture, throughout history – that link us, one to the other, in spite of our differences. That we can all "simply" be human in this space is a profoundly appealing idea that makes museums attractive places to visit, particularly as sites that carry our common culture, writ large. It signals that we are all part of one society. Right?

While this sense of belonging to the universe of humanity is certainly lofty and appealing, it signals precisely the problem with thinking a museum can be a neutral space. As Esche told me, "At a certain moment, you're likely to come across this jarring conflict between that claim of universality and the reality

of this display of white supremacist, European power, Euro-American power, that's being enacted there in the name of the universal. The universal falls apart."

Both the modes of display and the fact that objects are physically located in a geography different to where they were produced highlight the difference in the ways that Western and non-Western art and artifacts are treated. This can be identified in many institutions via the physical installation of the works, the histories of their acquisition, and why and how they came to be sited within a particular museum. This is where histories of colonization and exploitation become part of the present lived experience of a visitor in the gallery. Realizations about which side of the exploitation equation your personal history lands on will often surface big realities; suddenly the museum doesn't seem quite so universal anymore. Or, perhaps more poignantly: *this definition of the universal does not include you*. When this moment occurs, that universality reveals itself as a mirage. Esche observes: "The museum is built on a lie. It's built on a universality that comes from a highly specific identity that is white, male, heterosexual, ableist, highly educated, wealthy, and so on."

There is a fundamental claim of the universal museum as a neutral space, made for all, but it is not at all a neutral space despite such claims. This neutrality and universality is claimed on behalf of a white, Euro-American perspective. Under the banner of universality, neutrality hides that there has always been a perspective, a set of biases, an exclusivity, that is at its core political, and has always been. Further, claims to neutrality can ultimately serve to disenfranchise audiences from their civic rights and responsibilities. The claim of neutrality, effectively insists that nothing critical or politically challenging can be expressed without the onus of "both-sideism." Neutrality, then, not only creates an artificial antagonism between the institution and its critics, but it also neuters political action, or at minimum does its best to defang its impact.

Further, an extension of this idea of universality is embedded in the ways museums imagine their audiences as a generic body. And yet this version of “generic” is in fact raced and classed and gendered, excluding many facets of identity that might influence how or what work is presented and received. And herein lies the kernel of alienation for anyone who identifies outside the imagined “generic human.” Chapter 2 closely examines how this has played out really via Black-led protests of the display of Dana Schutz’s painting of Emmitt Till, *Open Casket*, at the 2017 Whitney Biennial, and the controversy over Indigenous-led protests of Sam Durant’s sculpture *Scaffold*, at the Walker Art Center.

So, if museums are spaces for holding culture, their logics are nearly exclusively dependent on a white, Western view of the world – not only in their physical forms, but also in their modes of presentation, pedagogical tropes, and operational and funding structures. Exposing these realities reveals the ruse of neutrality for what it is – a reinforcement of the inequitable status quo. Keeping this state of affairs in mind, let’s return to the early days of institutional development in the United States. As this history unfolds, it will become clear how the discussions about the inheritances of colonial conditions and universalism play a role in how US museums are perceived and function today.

In 1773, the Charleston Library Society in Charleston, South Carolina, provided natural history artifacts that led to the foundation of the first museum in the Americas. The society, created in 1748, consisted of a group of “gentlemen” who agreed to purchase books, pamphlets, and other materials to share among themselves, and what would soon grow to be a sizable membership. Indeed, the drive was so strong to introduce these learning materials to a larger public that a 1762 advertisement for the society stated, in the overtly racist language of the times,

“The gross ignorance of the naked Indian must raise our pity (so) it is our duty as men, our interest as members of a community, to take every step, pursue every method in our power, to prevent our descendants from sinking into a similar situation.”³¹

Having survived war, fire, and multiple natural disasters over the span of its existence, the society’s holdings were stored in various members’ homes, in a local free school, and even in the upper floors of a member’s liquor warehouse. As with other early museums in North America, this institution was modeled on European conceptions of the museum and focused on objects of natural history; its mission was “to collect materials for a full and accurate natural history of South Carolina.”³²

It was at this moment in the late eighteenth century that the museum emerged in North America, an early institution reflecting both burgeoning colonial power and collective desires of the colonizers to make meaning in the “New World.” Most early museums in this geography, like the Charleston Library Society, were devoted to understanding and classifying the natural environs studied by the Europeans who migrated across the Atlantic during this period – the same Europeans who were actively attempting to disappear the cultures indigenous to these territories, and had killed millions of Native people through early colonial settlement.

By the mid nineteenth century, major collections of Indigenous American objects were established at the Smithsonian (1846), the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University (1866), and the American Museum of Natural History (1869), followed by the Field Museum of Natural History (1893). And they collected not only art and everyday objects, but also human remains.³³ As historian Amy Lonetree notes, since Indigenous populations were “vanishing ... anthropologists at the turn of the twentieth century imagined themselves in a race against time. They saw themselves as engaged in ‘salvage anthropology’ to collect the so-called last

vestiges of a dying race.”³⁴ Of course, that “dying race” was precarious only because of the brutal genocidal and assimilationist policies and practices of the colonial government and people.

While natural history and anthropological museums are not the focus of these chapters (except in relation to recent protests concerning the American Museum of Natural History in New York City discussed further on), they had an important influence on the formation of US art museums. As with the Charleston Library Society, most early North American museums were initiated by “members” and over time were gradually opened, for short periods, to the public. Interestingly, the founders, members, and collectors involved in these early natural sciences museums often were not experts, but rather enthusiasts. For instance, Charles Willson Peale is credited with being the “first great American Museum director.”³⁵ His Peale’s American Museum in Philadelphia (founded in 1786), with branches in Baltimore and New York, not only held natural wonders and dioramas, but also included “portraits of nearly three hundred Founding Fathers, painted chiefly by himself or members of his family.”³⁶ Peale was a painter and a naturalist – notably naming his sons Titian, Rafaele, Rembrandt, and Reubens – and is considered an accomplished painter of the revolutionary period. His decision to open the museum was as much an indication of his politics as it was of the capitalist colonialism from which it was born. As John Simmons points out in his extensive history of museums, Peale, “wholeheartedly embraced the Enlightenment ideals of intellectual freedom and tolerance ... with the democratic [and I would add capitalist] notion of providing instruction and entertainment to all visitors who paid the entrance fee.”³⁷ From these very early days, the franchise of the museum, as well as its reliance on entrance fees and the need to attract a broad swath of the (largely white, educated) populace, marked its relationship to capitalism.

As the political structures of the United States evolved, the definition of culture, along with its display, was important to its status as an emerging nation and quest to be a world power. Pivotal in this process were the men who gained major financial success in the United States: men who desired affiliation with the perceived cultural refinement of Europe, and therefore insisted the nation assert its ability to acquire works from “less advanced” cultures. Indeed, between 1800 and 1900 in the United States, a pattern emerged that followed a formulation fairly common in England: “The wealthy private individual who left a personal collection to become a public museum.”³⁸ This would become an enduring model in the United States, continuing to the present day, as evidenced both by the existence of the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Morgan Library, for example, as well as the beneficence of the Sackler family toward cultural institutions.

Another essential element of the museum’s reimagination as a public venue was its relationship to education and literacy. Libraries, famously made publicly accessible by the largesse of Andrew Carnegie, are a prime example of this ideology in action. As a boy, Carnegie worked in a Pennsylvania textile mill threading bobbins for the machines. Wanting to improve his lot in life, he hoped to educate himself at the local library, which had a \$2 subscription he couldn’t afford. By the time he became a steel magnate and among the wealthiest people in the world, he used a portion of his fortune to build a network of local libraries across the US, with the stipulation that they be public and free.³⁹

Further, museums, like libraries, were central to the democratic agenda of the development of the United States as a nation-state. George Brown Goode, American zoologist and assistant secretary of the Smithsonian in charge of the National Museum, said in 1889, “The museum of the future of this democratic land should be adapted to the needs of the mechanic,

the factory operator, the day-laborer, and the clerk, as much as to those of the professional man and the man of leisure.”⁴⁰ Thus, not only did the museum occupy the space of collections and study, but these ideals also had to be reconciled with a desire for public education.

While public education as a foundational idea and rhetorical position for museums in the United States evolved over the course of the last century, many of the same hurdles encountered a hundred years ago have yet to be cleared. In 1917, the Progressive thinker and librarian John Cotton Dana wrote an essay titled “The Gloom of the Museum,” in which he describes the reality that is the early twentieth-century museum, and, in his view, its failures with respect to its educational aims. Among his contentions is that many of the private collections that entered into museums were assembled by a very narrow demographic: men of wealth and education who made idiosyncratic and personal collections that ended up in the public sphere, whether via donation or purchase. These objects, desired and acquired by specific individuals, were not only raced and classed, but also came to represent what was “important” or even “excellent” in art and culture. Dana puts it bluntly: “These collectors were usually entirely selfish in their acquisition, rarely looking beyond their own personal pleasure or the aggrandizement of their immediate families.”⁴¹ Further, as collections of personal taste, they naturally excluded bodies of work, aesthetics, ideas, and makers with which or with whom the collector was not familiar, did not like, or simply never encountered. His analysis from over one hundred years ago remains strikingly relevant to museums today; indeed, his critique still stands. These collections, and the spaces that contain them were never neutral. They have always been about personal tastes and agendas, both private and public.

Taking into account the sources of many collections depicts only part of the picture. By the twentieth century, these donated

materials had been part of the museum apparatus for more than a century, and during this time they had been studied by more than one generation of scholars, whose commitment to the importance of these items was only intensified by their study and by museum's devoted curators, from the Latin *curare*, meaning "to care for." So today, like in 1917, as Dana wrote, "as the collections were of very great value ... the first thought in regard to them was their preservation; their utilization [or even usefulness] being a secondary and rather remote affair."⁴² While the rhetoric around the primary function of museums in the United States may sound a bit more nuanced today, and extends to the wonderful work done by educators and public programming staffs, invariably their work is less highly esteemed than that of the curatorial team. This disparity reflects an ongoing tension between these two necessary and important museum functions, which have yet to be meaningfully de-siloed and integrated with one another.

Even beyond these conceptual obstacles, as Dana points out, are the types of buildings erected to display invaluable collections. The architecture of the museum often harkens back to its Alexandrian roots, as a temple devoted to knowledge. Once again, US museums followed the lead of their European forebears, leading to the establishment of monumental spaces that paid architectural homage to the Greek temple or the Renaissance palazzo (think of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, or the Met in New York City with their grand stairs, fluted columns, and imposing stone construction). These design decisions would entail another form of obstruction for the twentieth-and twenty-first-century museum to overcome: "Art museums [became] remote palaces and temples – filled with objects not closely associated with the life of the people who are asked to get pleasure and profit from them, and so arranged and administered as to make them seem still more remote."⁴³

So how did this square with the impetus for democratic

public education via the museum? The answer is, not very well (never mind questions of whether the public even *wanted* the kind of education on offer, and who this public might comprise, both of which I will address further on). John Cotton Dana's scathing critique of the early twentieth-century museum includes a sarcastic and yet strangely apt question: "Is the department store a museum?"

A great city department store of the first class is perhaps more like a good museum of art than are any of the museums we have yet established. It is centrally located; it is easily reached; it is open to all at all the hours when patrons wish to visit it; it receives all courteously and gives information freely; it displays its most attractive and interesting objects and shows countless others on request; its collections are classified according to the knowledge and needs of its patrons; it is well lighted; it has convenient and inexpensive rest rooms; it supplies guides free of charge; it advertises itself widely and continuously; and it changes its exhibits to meet daily changes in subjects of interest, changes of taste in art, and the progress of invention and discovery.⁴⁴

While some of these observations are out of date, there are more than a few strategies herein that might be unpacked for their relevance today. In fact, when I was director of the Queens Museum, I used to say, only half-jokingly, that many people came to the museum for the public bathrooms, and then stayed for the art. After all, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, in which the museum is located, is the fourth-largest public park in New York City (bigger than both Central Park and Prospect Park) but has few public toilets. The museum's bathrooms are clean and free to enter, and the building also happens to contain locally relevant, world-class art exhibitions and free kids' programming on weekends. What could be better?

Dana goes on to acknowledge the obvious, that "[a]

department store is not a good museum,” but he proposes this rhetorical flourish: “so far are museums from being the active and influential agencies they might be that they may be compared with department stores and not altogether to their advantage.”⁴⁵

It makes sense that Dana would create this particular type of “wish list” for the museum, given his history as a library director; he is celebrated for having radically shifted the ways in which libraries were used at the turn of the twentieth century. The City of Newark, New Jersey, where he oversaw the library and museum, was a city of immigrants, and he incorporated foreign-language materials in the collection of the former, writing regularly in local papers to be sure immigrant populations knew about the resources available. He was also one of the first to create a separate children’s room or section within the library, welcoming the youngest patrons, and further, he created “a 10,000-object loan collection primarily for use by the schools, but available to anyone with a Newark library card. The museum delivered loans to classrooms three times per week by truck.”⁴⁶

His commitment to the premise that regular daily life should enter the library paralleled his desires for museums. He insisted that the broadest public should be provided with access to the full range of reading material, from anarchist tracts to romance novels. He believed that the average person would find what they were looking for, and should be encouraged to encounter any variety of ideas on their path. In other words, libraries should not be “dumbed down,” and library patrons should not be “protected” from ideas that some administrator considered difficult or dangerous. While his influence was far greater on libraries than museums, it is instructive to see how alike the two once were, and how differently they are perceived in the United States today. Indeed, the evolution of libraries in this country offers useful points for reflection on how museums might adapt in the twenty-first century.

While the parallels between libraries and museums are obvious, it is equally obvious that libraries feel different from museums. Why do they have a public spirit that most museums lack? Why are there lines around the block at some New York City library branches at 9 a.m.? Both institutions in the United States evolved in similar ways; so how have they diverged? And is this divergence relevant to the ways in which a stunningly broad swath of society feels welcome in a public library, but not in a museum?

One answer to these questions concerns access. Access to public libraries in the United States is remarkable, in part thanks to Carnegie's early interventions. According to one statistician with the Institute of Museum and Library Services in Washington, DC, "There's always that joke that there's a Starbucks on every corner, but when you really think about it, there's a public library wherever you go, whether it's in New York City or some place in rural Montana. Very few communities are not touched by a public library." In fact, in 2013 there were more public libraries in the United States (17,000) than McDonalds outposts (14,000).⁴⁷ And of course, they are also free to enter, which removes a significant barrier for the public.

Let's return to Dana's essay, which clarifies another divergence between museums and libraries; the question of how expertise is embodied quite differently within the two institutions. Museum experts, Dana says:

*become enamored of rarity, of history ... They become lost in their specialties and forget their museum. They become lost in their idea of a museum and forget its purpose. They become lost in working out their idea of a museum and forget their public. And soon, not being brought constantly in touch with the life of their community ... they become entirely separated from it and go on making beautifully complete and very expensive collections but never construct a living, active, and effective institution.*⁴⁸

Museums and libraries in the United States originated in similar places and via similar patronage models, with their foundational collections coming largely from wealthy collectors of books and art objects, sometimes in conjunction with institutions of higher learning. However, the word “public” remains embedded in what we call the library. And while some branches are named for generous funders, their interests are secondary to the overall system. In fact, the Queens Public Library system, among the largest in the nation, boasts of having a branch within a mile and a half of every Queens resident, achieving a level of accessibility unheard of for a museum.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I spoke with Cora Fisher, curator of visual art programming, and Jakab Orsós, vice president of arts and culture, at the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL).⁴⁹ Orsós and Fisher center accessibility within their intellectual framework and, relatedly, see the library as a repository of ideas and public information, rather than of expertise. In this way, their hope is that when BPL explicitly presents issuedriven programs, audiences might encounter these as participants rather than as recipients of knowledge. In Fisher’s words, when she and Orsós imagine programs for the library, they are “visioning an active civic body” that not only desires engagement with the subjects explored, but also expects the library to engage in issues important to their lives. This does not sound like neutrality because, strategically and purposefully, it isn’t.

One example of how this works was an initiative that took place throughout 2020. Envisioned as a civic exercise in advance of the US presidential election in November, the 28th Amendment Project invited the people of Brooklyn to imagine what should be added to or omitted from the US Constitution. Comprising negotiations and workshops that took advantage of the dispersed conditions of the library branches, participants thought together about the role of the US Constitution

historically and in the present day. They collectively critiqued and augmented existing documents, while forging possible alternatives, which were compiled and also ratified by the participants. This new Twenty-Eighth Amendment was then released to the public a few weeks before the 2020 Presidential election on behalf of the people of Brooklyn. Hundreds of people across the borough participated in crafting this new Amendment. With the help of moderators, it resulted in a document that addresses issues ranging from election reform and political participation to the right to bodily safety, greater economic equity, education, and healthcare, alongside criminal justice reforms and environmental justice.⁵⁰

Programming conceived with these priorities and levels of engagement in mind draws a person into the library as a space of collective public knowledge – not only as a reader, but as an author as well. In this sense, the library is a space that honors not only the knowledge of “experts,” but also the knowledge that each of us carries as individuals. These 28th Amendment workshops were one example of how to create spaces of mutual learning and engagement, connecting the civic, the personal, and the poetic. Cultural spaces can, should, and *must* host these kinds of gatherings, acknowledging not only how institutions choose to relate to the issues at hand, but also intentionally engaging with the public’s lived experiences so that they can be hashed out in public. Rather than a space of abstracted expertise, the cultural sphere should be understood by the public as a zone in which to negotiate issues we may not necessarily agree on. Fisher aptly summed up this perspective when she said the BPL’s “goal and the ethos [in art and public programming] is about being subversive, cultivating curiosity, engaging in democracy.”⁵¹

Returning to the arc of cultural history, the Cold War held decisive influence on the role of culture in the United States.

Emerging from World War II, the country was poised for economic prosperity in ways unimaginable amid the destroyed infrastructure of Europe. It was a moment when US art and culture grew with the expanding economy, while simultaneously aligning with the enduring trope that freedom and democracy had defeated fascism.

For some, the splatters and sprays in Jackson Pollock's drip paintings represented the strength and freedom of American life. The mainstreaming of his abstract expressionist style – in the pages of *Life* magazine, through its endorsement by prominent and wealthy patrons such as Peggy Guggenheim, and even via the promotional efforts of the CIA – echoed the dramatic freedom and individualism of American mythologies. In this imaginary, the lone cowboy, the pioneer, the inventor, were all heroes, each pursuing bold, singular dreams. This art was as American as hot dogs and blue jeans (neither of which are actually uniquely American, but rather hail from immigrant traditions). And its characteristics fit into larger narratives that fought the figurative socialist realist propaganda of the Soviet Union, which by the late 1940s had replaced Nazism as the ideological enemy of the United States.

The unprecedented economic growth of the postwar years coincided with the distillation of modernism into its most concentrated form – conditions that were manifest in the United States in both museums and the culture at large. Within the museum, the white cube, the blank slate that transferred power and importance to artworks displayed within its walls, and itself a sign of aesthetic neutrality, became central to the museum's display tactics, convincing new generations of experts and publics of the onward progress of art through to the avant-garde of abstract expressionism. Meanwhile, the commercial art gallery also gained in prominence and power. Parallel forces, now inextricably intertwined, brought the symbolism of modern art together with ideology, and with the art market. Indeed, now

it was not only the freethinking West versus the repressed East that was reflected in art, museums, and commercial art galleries, but also capitalism versus communism; the two economic systems went head to head.

As far as neutrality is concerned, it also played a particular role during this period that persists today. Claims to this “neutral” space of the gallery also serve to absent and disenfranchise publics from their civic rights and responsibilities. The neutral space, after all, demands a certain reverence, neutering or attempting to neuter criticality, and even political action, as it declares its dominance.

At mid century, the form taken by US hegemony inside the museum was a firm commitment to abstraction and universalism that rejected the socialist realism of Soviet art. Moving far beyond the figurative propaganda of the prewar moment, the 1950s brought forth a deceptive skein of neutrality in a commitment to this type of art and modes of display, belying the profoundly political messages it was used to promote. This art became symbolic ammunition to discredit Soviet communism aesthetically, economically, and ideologically.

Then, in the 1960s, rebellions against the status quo emerged in every facet of American life, including protests aimed at cultural spaces and expressing specific frustrations around racial segregation, urban dispossession, working-class immiseration, and the jingoism of the Vietnam War. The long-standing wound of the enslavement of African Americans in the United States had already unleashed a powerful civil rights movement that crossed racial, ethnic, and class lines. Organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), founded in 1960 with the help of veteran activist Ella Baker, were gathering steam among students protesting a range of urgent conditions. The American Indian Movement (AIM) was founded in Minneapolis in 1968 to gain economic and civil rights for Indigenous people. Second-wave

feminist activism put a spotlight on reproductive rights, sexuality, family, and employment, among other spaces of inequity for women. Specific to the art world, the Black Arts movement emerged in 1965, followed by the founding of the Art Workers' Coalition in 1969. The undifferentiated hegemony of the United States of the postwar years was shedding its veneer to reveal a populace that was as diverse as it was culturally vibrant. And those in power – the white patriarchy – were put on notice.

In her book *Whitewalling: Art, Race, & Protest in 3 Acts*, feminist cultural critic and art historian Aruna D'Souza dedicates a chapter to protests around the 1969 exhibition *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968*, held at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. As D'Souza thoughtfully lays out, the protestors' demands that Black communities be centered in art institutions remain both urgent and highly relevant to today's cultural circumstances. These demands and the responses of the Met are poignant today because they are weirdly proximate to both protestors' demands and institutional responses 50 years later. D'Souza insightfully describes the steps taken by the Met to strategically expand audiences and avoid controversy:

[The] Metropolitan Museum of Art did everything right when it came to what we might now call “diversity and inclusion,” [and] it was imagined as an almost utopian effort to heal a festering racial divide in New York City. It was conceived explicitly as a way to invite heretofore ignored black audiences into the museum. It was put together with a staff that included black collaborators. Three separate advisory committees of black cultural leaders, “influencers,” and experts were organized ... But despite all of this – or rather because of it – the exhibition failed in spectacular ways.⁵²

The most egregious error, within a web of missteps, was that while the exhibition brought images of Black people and Harlem inside the Met in unprecedented ways, *none* of these images were *produced* by Black people. At a historic juncture, “no black art was ... included.”⁵³ In spite of the advisory efforts of Black members of committees and consultants, this was an exhibition that largely came from the imagination of a single white man: its curator, Allon Schoener. John Henrik Clarke, a Black activist and historian whose work focused specifically on Harlem, wrote to artist Romare Bearden at the time, “The basis of the trouble with this project is that it never belonged to us and while a lot of people listened to our suggestions about the project very few of these suggestions were ever put in place.”⁵⁴ The frustration and outrage among the advisors to the project, including Clarke, spread far beyond this group of relative insiders. The Harlem Cultural Council withdrew its support for the exhibition in November of 1968, after its recommendations were ignored, and Harlem-based artist Benny Andrews started the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) specifically to protest the exhibition. On January 12, 1969, BECC arrived at the police-barricaded Met with placards reading “That’s White of Hoving!” “Harlem on whose mind?” “Whose image of whom?” “On the Out by Massa Hoving.”; they presented a list of demands including the “appointment of Black people on a curatorial level and in all other policy-making areas of the museum” along with a flyers that pinpointed their fury:

*One would certainly imagine that an art museum would be interested in the world of Harlem’s painters and sculptors. Instead, we are offered an audio-visual display comparable to those installed in hotel lobbies during conventions. If art represents the very soul of a people, then this rejection of the Black painter and sculptor is the most insidious segregation of all.*⁵⁵

More than a few critics saw Met director Thomas Hoving's support for *Harlem on My Mind* as a cynical ploy to tap into the rising activism of the late 1960s in a way that would also advance his own desires for the museum, by drawing a direct line to its relevance to the communities in Harlem. In fact, simultaneous to the planning of the exhibition, Hoving was attempting to expand the museum into the public domain of Central Park to accommodate the Temple of Dendur. On the one hand, D'Souza explains,

[Hoving] saw the Met as a site of "creative confrontation"... as a benevolent, neutral platform where not just opposing ideas but communities in conflict could come and work out their differences. But thanks to the emergence of the Black Arts Movement, itself fueled by the language of Black Nationalism, the Harlem cultural community had a much different, and indeed progressive idea of what museums were and what they could be. Black organizers, recognizing them not simply as neutral platforms for display and debate but as mechanisms of power, sought to intervene in existing institutions – as well as create new ones – in ways that foregrounded museums' role in their communities, including acting as an active force in the struggle for racial justice. They were after transformation, not inclusion.⁵⁶

Interestingly, in the wake of the effort to site the Temple of Dendur at the Met, D'Souza notes that "there were also calls by black community groups, politicians, and activist organizations to consider putting the Temple of Dendur in Harlem." Others demanded that the museum relocate parts of its collection to satellites throughout New York City in order to subvert the fact that many historically marginalized communities felt unwelcome at the Met's flagship on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.⁵⁷ To this day, these same swirling controversies and demands around museum spaces and their public function

continue to resurface.

These concurrent struggles, concerning both Black leadership in art institutions and the relationship of the museum to urban space, index the power and wealth differential between those affiliated with the Met (at all levels) vis-à-vis the BECC and other Black community groups. Indeed, these deep-seated tensions make it clear why this venerable institution could never be considered to be a “neutral” space for debate about *Harlem on My Mind*. Hoving’s ability to instrumentalize race-conscious advocacy and protest for realpolitik acquisition of public land cannot be separated from the exhibition’s institutional failure and what transpired afterward.

The wing that Hoving proposed, the permanent home of the Temple of Dendur, eventually opened in 1978. It is named for the Sackler family, whose major gift made its construction possible, and was subsequently home to Nan Goldin’s 2018 PAIN protests. The accumulations, even in just this one example, of inequity are staggering. No museum is neutral, nor has it ever been. Indeed, from their very outset, museum structures have reflected a vast inequity of both power and wealth.

NOTES

- 1 Arts and Democracy, an organization that fosters cultural organizing, has useful resources about this work on its website, including the following definition of this work: “Cultural organizing exists at the intersection of arts, culture and activism. It is a fluid and dynamic practice that is understood and expressed in a variety of ways, reflecting the unique cultural, artistic, organizational and community context of its practitioners. Cultural organizing is about integrating arts and culture into organizing strategies. It is also about organizing from a particular tradition, cultural identity, and community of place or worldview to advance social and economic justice.” See “Cultural Organizing: Definition and Framework,” Arts and Democracy official website, accessed March 18, 2020.
- 2 Immigrant Movement International, Corona, also known as IMI Corona, was a community run space initiated by artist Tania Bruguera, together with the Queens Museum and Creative Time. As of 2020 the organization continues to operate independently from the museum as Centro Corona.
- 3 Liz Robbins, “‘Economic Tsunami’: Fearing Donald Trump, Immigrants in New York Spend Less,” *New York Times*, November 23, 2016.
- 4 Sarah Cascone, “The Guggenheim Teams Up with More Than 100 Museums to Fight Trump’s Immigration Ban,” *ArtNet News*, September 21, 2017.
- 5 The Art Space Sanctuary guidelines can be found on its website, artspace-sanctuary.org.
- 6 Robin Pogrebin, “At Queens Museum, Director is as Political as the Art,” *New York Times*, October 8, 2017.
- 7 “Statement by President Trump on Jerusalem,” White House, December 6, 2017.
- 8 “Museum Facts and Data,” American Alliance of Museums, accessed April 29, 2019.
- 9 See the Political Activities and Lobbying page on the US Internal Revenue Service website, particularly the links to “political activities” and “legislative activities” at irs.gov/charities-nonprofits/charitable-organizations/political-and-lobbying-activities accessed December 13, 2020.
- 10 Zachary Small, “A New Definition of ‘Museum’ Sparks International Debate,” *Hyperallergic*, August 19, 2019.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Andrew Russeth, “‘They Should Be in Jail’: Nan Goldin, Anti-Sackler Opioid Activists Take Fight to Guggenheim, Met,” *ArtNews*, February 10, 2019.
- 13 Dan Keating and Samuel Granados, “See How Deadly Street Opioids Like ‘Elephant Tranquilizer’ Have Become,” *Washington Post*, October 25, 2017. 3

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- 15 Patrick Radden Keefe, “The Family That Built an Empire of Pain,” *New*
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- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Quoted in Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 This method of dropping flyers from the upper ramps of the Guggenheim
rotunda was borrowed from protests conducted by G.U.L.F. – Global Ultra
Luxury Faction, the direct action arm of the artist and activist group Gulf
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- 22 Soo Youn, “NYU Langone No Longer Accepting Donations from the
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News, June 12, 2019; Ellen Barry, “Tufts Removes Sackler Name Over
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National and Tribal Museums (University of North Carolina Press, 2012),
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- 34 Ibid., 10.
- 35 Alexander and Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, 6.
- 36 Ibid., 6.
- 37 John E. Simmons, *Museums: A History*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 136.
- 38 Ibid., 150.
- 39 Stamberg, Susan. "How Andrew Carnegie Turned His Fortune into a Library Legacy," NPR, August 1, 2013.
- 40 George Brown Goode, *Museum History and Museums of History* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1889), 263.
- 41 Cotton Dana, quoted in Gail Anderson, *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift* (AltaMira Press, 2012), 21.
- 42 Ibid., 21.
- 43 Ibid., 24.
- 44 Ibid., 29.
- 45 Ibid., 29.
- 46 "John Cotton Dana – Newark's First Citizen," Rutgers University Libraries, accessed September 24, 2020; Cynthia Robinson, "From the Editor-in-Chief," *Journal of Museum Education* 44, no.1 (2019): 1-3.
- 47 Emily Badger, "Every Library and Museum in America, Mapped," CityLab, June 7, 2013.
- 48 Cotton Dana, quoted in Gail Anderson, *Reinventing the Museum: The Evolving Conversation on the Paradigm Shift* (AltaMira Press, 2012), 28-9.
- 49 Since I began this conversation with the Brooklyn Public Library, we have planned a series of public programs together called the Art and Society Census, which I discuss in greater detail in the coming pages.
- 50 Visit the Brooklyn Public Library's webpage on the 28th Amendment for a wealth of details on these public discussions.
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