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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Money, Ethics, Art: Can Museums Police Themselves?

By Holland Cotter

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For generations Americans tended to see art museums as alternatives to crass everyday life. Like libraries, they were for learning; like churches, for reflection. You went to them for a hit of Beauty and a lesson in "eternal values," embodied in relics of the past donated by civic-minded angels.

You probably didn't know — and most museums weren't going to tell you — that many of those relics were stolen goods. Or that more than a few donor-angels were plutocrats trying to scrub their cash clean with art. Or that the values embodied in beautiful things were often, if closely examined, abhorrent.

Today, we're more alert to these ethical flaws, as several recent protests against museums show, though we still have a habit of trusting our cultural institutions, museums and universities among them, to be basically right-thinking. At moments of political crisis and moral confusion we look to them to justify our trust.

The 1960s was such a moment. At least early in that decade we had hopes that universities would take a principled stand on evils — war, racism — that were burning the country up. But when it became clear that our figurehead schools were, in fact, hard-wired into the machinery that fueled the conflict in Vietnam and perpetuated global apartheid, faith was shattered and has never really been restored.

At present, we're locked in another crisis, what might be called an internal American war — on the environment, on the poor, on difference, on truth. And it's the turn of another cultural institution, the art museum, now popular in a way it has never been, to be the object of critical scrutiny.

Since early March, an activist collective called Decolonize This Place (D.T.P.) has been bringing weekly protests to the Whitney Museum of American Art. Their immediate demand is the removal of a museum trustee, Warren B. Kanders, the owner of a company, Safariland, that produces military supplies, including a brand of tear gas that has reportedly been used at the United States-Mexico border.

The Whitney Museum of American Art, above, has been the site of weekly protests calling for the removal of Warren Kanders from the museum's board, including the one, below, on May 3. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

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Another group, Prescription Addiction Intervention Now (P.A.I.N.), has, over the past year, staged disruptive events at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, protesting the acceptance of gifts of art and money from branches of the Sackler family, longtime patrons who have been identified as producers of the addictive opioid OxyContin.

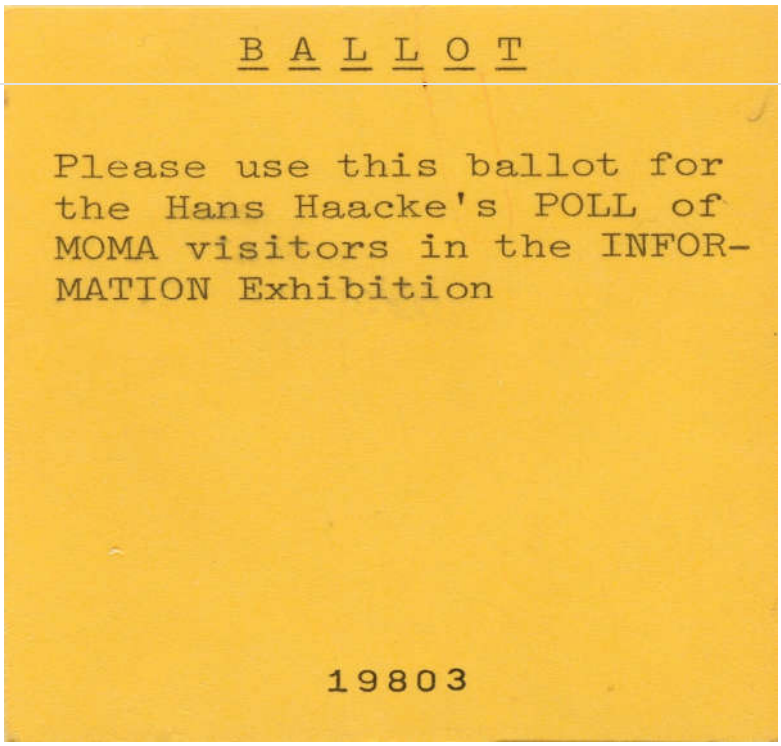
Finally, long-existing art museum collections have been under a heightened ethical searchlight since the French president, Emmanuel Macron, proposed in 2018 that objects looted from Africa during an earlier colonial era be returned, on demand, to their places of origin — a project which, if ratified, could easily apply to a wide spectrum of Western and non-Western art.

In short, in the space of barely a year, the very foundations of museums — the money that sustains them, the art that fills them, the decision makers that run them — have been called into question. And there's no end to questioning in sight.

Recently, the American Museum of Natural History came under fire for renting out space for a dinner honoring Jair Bolsonaro, the outspokenly racist, homophobic, anti-environment president of Brazil. (The rental arrangement abruptly ended.) In late April, the Art Institute of Chicago took heat for planning a major show of culturally sensitive Native American pottery by the ancient Mimbres people — including sacred objects — without consulting indigenous communities with ties to the Mimbres people. (The show has been postponed while the museum seeks counsel from Native American nations.)

Politically driven museum protests are not new. In 1969, members of a collective called the Guerrilla Art Action Group gathered in the Museum of Modern Art's lobby, drenched themselves in cow's blood and scattered copies of a scathing manifesto titled: "A Call for the Immediate Resignation of All the Rockefellers from the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art." It accused the brothers David Rockefeller and Nelson Rockefeller (then governor of New York) of "brutal involvement in all spheres" of the Vietnam War.

In the same year, African-American artists, under the name Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC), boycotted the Met exhibition "Harlem on My Mind." The show was advertised as bringing African-American culture, for the first time, into the museum's august precincts. But it included no black art or curatorial participation, and served to confirm race-based exclusion as an institutional norm.



A ballot used for Hans Haacke's "MoMA Poll."
The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

There's a parallel history of protest generated from within museums, a pioneering example being Hans Haacke's 1970 conceptual piece, "MoMA Poll." As part of a large MoMA group exhibition, Mr. Haacke set up in a gallery two clear plastic bins, a ballot dispenser and a sign reading: "Question: Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November? Answer: "If 'yes' please cast your ballot into the left box. If 'no' into the right box." To the museum's consternation, and Rockefeller's displeasure, the "yes" bin filled up fast.

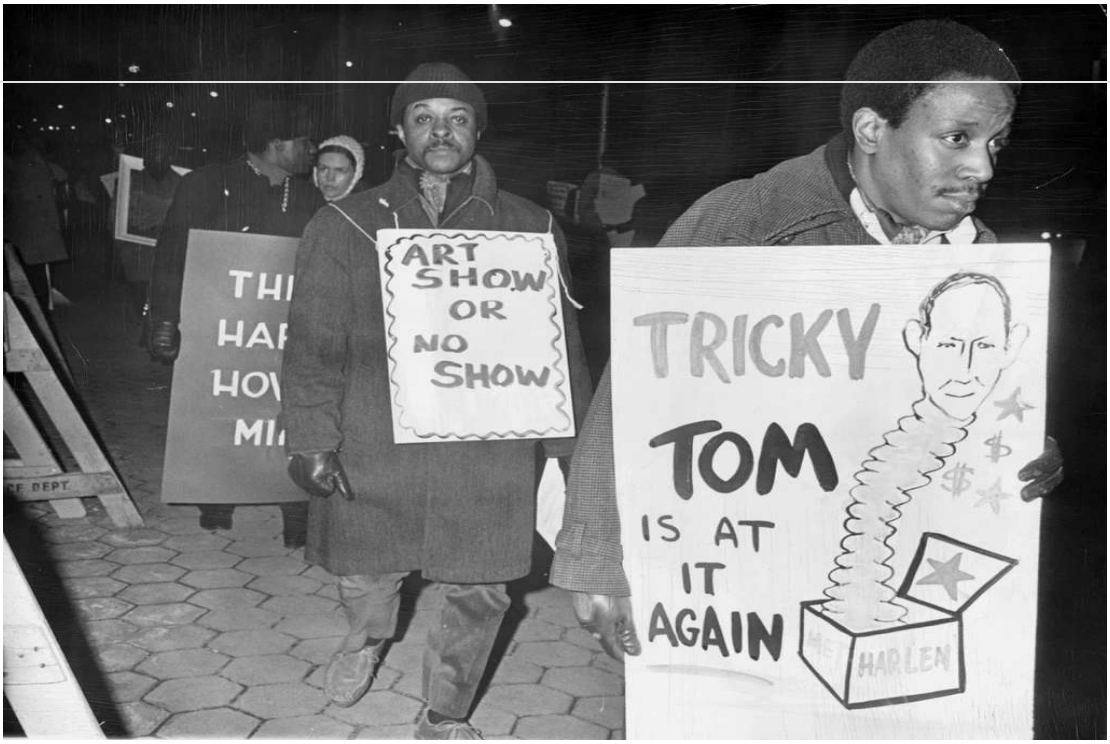
Such museum-targeted work has since earned a genre name, "institutional critique," which, problematically, has served as a marketing handle. Once critique became collectible, as it almost inevitably did, it was absorbed into, and neutralized by, the institutions it was meant to correct. (Groups like D.T.P., which call their protest work art, naturally have to be alert for such co-option.)

An omnivorous, sleepless market is the defining feature of the 21st-century art landscape. Money is the universal solvent. It converts everything into itself. Aesthetic value measured in dollars has, of course, always been part of the talk about art. Now it's pretty much the whole conversation, amplified by auctions and art fairs, and directed at a population of new big-budget buyers.

Consumption is contagious, competitive, circular. Private collectors buy contemporary work of a kind museums can no longer afford. Museums, trying to attract gifts of such work, go on expansion sprees. To pay for expansions, they have to beef up their boards with rich recruits (often collectors), the source of whose fortunes are sometimes, as in the case of the Sacklers and Mr. Kanders, of a kind best left unadvertised.

In practical terms, museums are on the spot. Even without expansion bloat, they're too expensive and unprofitable to be fiscally self-sustaining. Government art support in the United States is less than meager (and would be zero if the current administration had its way). Which leaves private, frequently corporate, money to lean on, and the good possibility that some of that money is tainted.

The controversial 1969 exhibition "Harlem on My Mind" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



A protest at the “Harlem on My Mind” exhibition in 1969.
Vernon Shibla/New York Post Archives, via Getty Images

What to do about Sackler patronage became easy to decide after evidence surfaced that certain family members associated with OxyContin production had known of its addictive properties, but suppressed the information. When this news broke several museums, including the Guggenheim, quickly cut ties. (The Met, more cautious, said it was “engaging in further review of our detailed gift acceptance policies.” Its report is due later this month.) Meanwhile, the Sackler Foundation finessed the need for further debate by calling a temporary halt to new art philanthropy.

By contrast, the reaction to Mr. Macron’s proposal to restore art pilfered from Africa has varied widely, and no consensus on action has been reached. Here Western institutions are on quaking ground with, it must seem, everything but good karma to lose. No doubt many are reluctant to even consider the idea of restitution. But if justice prevails, they’ll have to. Otherwise, colonialism rolls on and on.

In any case, at this point, generally applicable algorithms for restitution are still unformed, though one guideline seems indisputable: that the first responsibility on the part of all concerned is to insure the safety of the fragile objects and materials under negotiation.

Where ethical debate is in full, heated progress right now is at the Whitney. The museum’s

administration has stonewalled on the issue of Mr. Kanders leaving the board, even though nearly 100 Whitney staff members, and more than half of the artists in the 2019 Biennial, which opens on May 17, have signed petitions demanding it. One Biennial artist, Michael Rakowitz, made a principled withdrawal from the show. Another participant, the artist collective called Forensic Architecture, plans to respond to the controversy with its contribution to the exhibition.

The photographer Nan Goldin participated in the February protest at the Guggenheim Museum. The New York Times

Early on, Mr. Kanders himself issued a statement of self-defense, arguing that he's not responsible for what purchasers do with Safariland defense gear; he only makes the stuff. And the Whitney's director, Adam Weinberg, has sent a fuzzy hug of a letter to staff. ("I write to you now as one community, one family — the Whitney.") In the middle of which he lets himself off the executive hook: "As members of the Whitney community, we each have our critical and complementary roles: trustees do not hire staff, select exhibitions, organize programs or remove board members, and staff does not appoint or remove board members." (This church-and-state separation is hardly a firm one, but never mind.)

The letter ends up being a very long way of saying "Sorry, we need Mr. Kanders's money."

In his letter Mr. Weinberg walks a calculated line between boosterism and selective silence. He's right in saying that the Whitney has championed some "progressive and challenging" exhibitions, pointing to recent Zoe Leonard and David Wojnarowicz retrospectives and the Latinx group show "Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay."

But he's wrong in refusing to acknowledge the moral issues raised by Mr. Kanders's résumé, and those raised by his own decision, as Whitney director, to clear the subject from the communal table, which his letter effectively does.

Mr. Kanders, for different but comparably expedient reasons, asserts a similar position of no-fault neutrality. Yet if you are in a position to support the arts, and you accept a position on the board of a museum, and it develops that your presence is disapproved of by the staff and detrimental to the reputation of the institution, isn't it your duty to step aside until the issues in question have been, one way or another, resolved? The answer is yes. Mr. Kanders should remove himself from the board.

In the present American political climate, with nationalism and racist, ethnic, and xenophobic violence at high tide, neutrality is not an option for institutions that have ethical imperatives, represented by art, built into their DNA.

We need these institutions, which include our art museums, to be proactive alternative environments, in which standardized power hierarchies are dissolved, a poly-cultural range of voices speak, the history of art is truthfully told, and truth itself is understood as an always-developing story.

All museums have ethical practice guidelines in place, but these can't cover the full range of potential objections to trustee appointments (which at present include issues involving arms manufacture, corporate drug production and climate change). Surely the moral intelligence of the entire institution should be brought to bear on judging, case by case, the nature of the support being offered, with the trust that a balance of idealism and pragmatism will prevail in decision-making. And that method of assessment will succeed only when an upstairs/downstairs structuring is eliminated within the museum.

In the end, the question of Mr. Kanders's staying or going may be less important than the discussion and protest his presence has raised, which should lead to further discussions about institutional ethics, and more protest. I believe it will.

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