

Art

HOLLAND COTTER | ESSAY

When Art, Money and Ethics Collide

Protesters assail museums over the source of donations.

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, hardwired 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.

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 the 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 Rockefeller's 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.

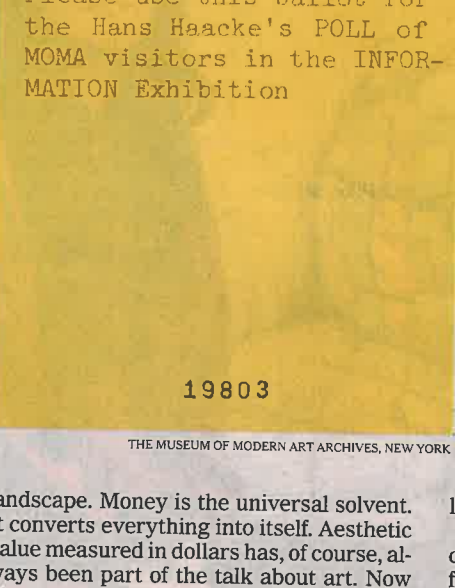
In the same year, African-American artists, under the name Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC), boycotted the Met



JEENAH MOON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ARCHIVES, NEW YORK



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THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

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 Ma-

lonialism 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 Friday, have signed petitions demanding it.

One Biennial protest

Top, a protest at the Guggenheim about donations from members of a family who own a company tied to the opioid crisis; middle row, protests (at left, this month and at right, last year) at the Whitney over a trustee who owns a company that sells military supplies; above left, a ballot from a 1970 MoMA show that asked museumgoers about Nelson Rockefeller and

edge the moral issues raised by Mr. Kanders's résumé, and those raised by his decision, as Whitney director, to clear subject from the communal table, which letter effectively does.

Mr. Kanders, for different but completely expedient reasons, asserts a similar position of no-fault neutrality. Yet if 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, solved? The answer is yes, Mr. Kanders