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The Ivory Tower is Burning: Colonialism, Neutrality, and the Future of America's Art Museums

By Anna Turner

"You invoke 'the museum' as if it were a homogenous community with a unified interest..." reads an April 2021 email sent to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Director Glenn Lowry by Strike MoMA organizers, a coalition of artists and activists striking against the "toxic philanthropy" of the museum's leadership.¹ The letter goes on to cite "the MoMA regime" as "a system of power and wealth that harms people, that uses art as an instrument of accumulation, and that makes empty appeals to what you call 'the public good' while covering for billionaires whose names have become synonymous with patriarchal violence, the carceral state, climate destruction, neo-feudal landlordism, and direct support for the NYPD Foundation."² Published in the middle of a ten-week Strike MoMA "deoccupation" of the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, the letter, despite its scathing specificity, articulates an enduring, near-ubiquitous dynamic between American museums and the broader communities in which they exist.

Since their inception, many American museums have existed as ivory towers; pillars of knowledge and meaning-making deliberately separated from the broader, surrounding communities they intend to serve. This positionality in American culture increasingly allows museums to perform a social and political neutrality; the more detached these spaces are from the communities they exist in, which are often urban, the more ease with which

museums can render invisible their socio-political positioning. This claim of neutrality begins to deteriorate when confronted with the grim reality that for many contemporary American museums, the central mode of display, acquisition, and engagement prioritizes the Euro-American experience and perspective more than any other. As former Queens Museum Director Laura Raicovich expertly notes in her book *Culture Strike*, "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."³

Suddenly, neutrality seems less a lack of social or political commitment and more an intentional and violent perpetuation of the colonialist ideologies on which museums in America were built. Raicovich later goes on to note, "...neutrality is claimed on behalf of a white, Euro-American perspective...[it] hides that there has always been a perspective, a set of biases, an exclusivity, that is at its core political, and has always been." In sum, Raicovich writes, neutrality operates as a "reinforcement of the inequitable status quo."⁴ Moreover, as underscored by the Strike MoMA letter to MoMA director Glenn Lowry, many museums in contemporary American culture are reductive in their understanding of the communities they aim to engage with and politically ambiguous so as to continue

¹ Strike MoMA, "Diversity of Tactics, Diversity of Aesthetics."

² Ibid, 1.

³ Raicovich, *Culture Strike*, 25.

⁴ Ibid, 3.

protecting “the circuits of capital that make the Settler Museum possible,” to borrow the language of Jasbir K. Puar, a member of the Strike MoMA working group, in ‘Writing for Post-MoMA Futures.’⁵

This paper seeks to serve as an exploration of this dynamic between community engagement and neutrality, as well as the dynamic between protest and institutional change. Without drawing any explicit conclusions, I intend for this paper to interrogate the myth of neutrality in contemporary museum culture in the US. Through explorations of both museums’ colonial foundations and of historic and contemporary protest in museums, I hope to pose these questions in my research:

How does neutrality uphold and reinforce the colonial-capitalist history of art museums in America? Do museums have the capacity to reimagine themselves and their purpose? How do protests impact this process?

I offer these questions as an avid museumgoer, a museum worker, and as a student with the intention of continuing a career in museums when I graduate. I also offer these questions as a middle-class white woman whose identity is more or less protected in museum spaces. In this paper, and in my career after graduation, I hope to leverage my identity to challenge the institutional loyalty that upholds white supremacy, engage with museum workers, scholars, and activists already doing the work—such as current and former museum professionals and activists like Laura Raicovich, Nina Simon, LaTanya Autry, and Mike Murawski— and join in the collective reimagining of more inclusive, community-centered museums. These institutions are at a flashpoint, certainly, but they are not beyond saving. Museums are cultural institutions with the resources and the responsibility to not only play an active role in social and political

movements, but also to display and cultivate diverse and accessible art and artistic practices. The persistent loyalty of these institutions to the culture of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and capitalism in which they were founded is central to a reckoning with how these institutions can deliver on their proposed responsibilities. To contextualize my ambitions, though, it is essential to understand how the first museums in America came to be and to what extent they laid the foundation for centuries of museum practice reliant on a “white, Western view of the world.”⁶

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines the museum as a “non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”⁷ When considering what constitutes the first museum in American culture, this 2007 definition nearly matches the eighteenth-century manifestation. The Charleston Library Society, a private collection later opened to a larger public audience, is often cited as the very first example of this in the United States. In 1748, a group of wealthy white men in Charleston, South Carolina formed a members-only society and vowed to develop a collection of artifacts to share amongst themselves. Within a few decades, the feeling of obligation to exhibit these collections to a public audience motivated the men to establish a formal exhibition space in 1773.⁸ As described in William G. Mazzyck’s comprehensive 1908 history of the Society, *The Charleston Museum: Its Genesis and Development*, “the...Society is an institution that does great honour to the State. The museum is situate on Chalmers street, nearly fronting the city square, and is well stored with curious objects in natural history,

⁵ Puar K., “Diversity of Tactics, Diversity of Aesthetics.”

⁶ Raicovich, Culture Strike, 26.

⁷ Fraser, “A Discomforting Definition of Museum.”

⁸ Raicovich, Culture Strike, 26.

Indian antiquities, foreign and native works of art, &c.”⁹ As referenced in Mazÿck’s account, the Charleston Library Society garnered support at the state level as an institution cultivating and disseminating meaning in the “New World,” while also asserting its significance at the physical level, in the literal positioning of the building in the center of its city square. More importantly, however, is the attention paid by Mazÿck to the contents of the Society.

In his “Colonial” essay in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, David Kazanjian defines settler-colonialism as “forms of dispossession in which colonists take up permanent residence in the territories they appropriate...such dispossession was a central means by which capitalists accumulated...wealth.”¹⁰ Considering this definition, the artifacts on display at the Charleston Library Society—namely “Indian antiquities, foreign and native works of art,”—are acute representations of “both burgeoning colonial power and collective desires of the colonizers to make meaning,” particularly with objects *devoid* of meaning or cultural significance to the typical attendees of the museum.¹¹ While European settler-colonialists violently displaced and sought to erase Indigenous cultures and communities from their rightful territories, they too pillaged and extracted the art and objects central to these cultures and their ways of living. Early museums like the Charleston Library Society exoticized these pillaged goods, exhibiting them in state-supported spaces of temple-like status, in an attempt to “understand and classify the natural environs” of the “New World” and align themselves with the cultural prowess of the world from which they had come, Europe.¹² The desired end of aligning with Europe in artistic

and intellectual supremacy was of particular relevance to the mission of early museums in America. And as tools for early nation-building, museums like the Charleston Library Society used violent, hegemonic language to articulate their institutional goals, as demonstrated below in an excerpt from a 1762 document, “The Rules and by-Laws of the Charlestown Library Society, 1762”:

As the gross ignorance of the naked Indian must raise our pity, and his savage disposition our horror and detestation, 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. To obviate this possible evil, and to obtain the desirable end of handing down the European arts and manners to the latest times, is the great aim of the members of this Society, who are ambitious of approving themselves worthy of their mother country, by imitating her humanity, as well as her industry, and by transporting from her the improvements in the finer as well as in the inferiour arts.¹³

While museums quickly assumed the status of “remote palaces and temples of knowledge” in American culture, no sooner did their practices prove an enthusiastic addition to the white supremacist, settler-colonial project of, well, the last four centuries.¹⁴ And as Kazanjian aptly underscores in his “Colonial” essay, “...histories of settler colonialism [unsettle] the myth of the North American as a quiet and beautiful, even heroic actor.”¹⁵ In this case, the idealized notion of these institutions as innocuous purveyors of excellence in art, culture, and knowledge begins to waver as soon as it is implicated in the brutally violent histories

⁹ Mazÿck, “Statistics of South Carolina, Charleston, 1826,” 437.

¹⁰ Kazanjian, “Colonial,” 49.

¹¹ Raicovich, *Culture Strike*, 27, and Dana, *The Gloom of the Museum*, as quoted by Raicovich.

¹² Raicovich, *Culture Strike*, 27.

¹³ “The Rules and By-Laws of the Charlestown Library Society, 1762.,” 2.

¹⁴ Alexander, Alexander, and Decker, *Museums in Motion*, 6.

¹⁵ Kazanjian, “Colonial,” 50.

of displacement these institutions so blatantly benefited from.

As the Charleston Library Society gained prominence in South Carolina and in the broader movement among colonists to categorize and display privately-owned, often stolen objects to the public, more museums emerged along the East coast in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹⁶ Most of these museums were born out of members-only societies composed of enthusiasts in a particular field, as in the case of the Charleston Library Society, and moved slowly to open their collections to the public. From the beginning of this insurgence, there was particular emphasis placed on a museums' ability and responsibility to educate the increasingly industrialized, urbanizing public. A facet of early nation-building efforts, museums were considered the key contributors to and producers of "new knowledge and research," a role that is hardly apolitical.¹⁷ Nearly all of the institutions that shifted to a public mode of engagement relied heavily both on entrance fees and on the enforcement of a hierarchy between the self-ascribed expertise of the "enthusiasts" and the assumed naivete of the visitors, a further assertion of cultivated supremacy in museums' knowledge production and dissemination.

In *Culture Strike*, Raicovich references the essay of early twentieth century progressive thinker and librarian John Cotton Dana, "The Gloom of the Museum " in discussing this dynamic. As Raicovich writes in her analysis, "Among [Dana's] 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...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."¹⁸ This resulted in, perhaps unsurprisingly, museums dominated by strikingly biased collections, informed by the politics and preferences of often a single white man. Moreover, the association made between these collections and their wider cultural importance and excellence encouraged museums to privilege certain modes of knowing over others.

One distinct articulation of this emerges in museum staff dynamics. Because most art museums in America today operate within a linear organizational structure, intellectual and institutional power is concentrated primarily at the top of this hierarchy, namely among curators, directors, and boards. This concentration of expertise and pedagogical roles existing solely at the top of a time-honored hierarchy—certainly reminiscent of early institutions like the Charleston Library Society founded by "enthusiasts"—contributes to a devaluing of knowledge cultivated by a museum's broader community. As scholar Emilie Sitzia notes in her article "The ignorant art museum: beyond meaning-making," "...many museums still hold on to a very antiquated view of museum education as a unidirectional system of learning as integrating the museum-approved narrative and of knowledge as factual knowledge held solely by experts."¹⁹ Sitzia's apt observation points to the dangers of maintaining traditional hierarchies and modes of learning and teaching in museums; in doing so, these institutions alienate community voices, uphold unequal power dynamics, and prevent reciprocal or co-created knowledge production. Some of this, too, comes from an elitism that is baked into the consciousness of museums. Contributing to this

¹⁶ Some of these museums include the Smithsonian, the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, and the American Museum of Natural History.

¹⁷ Rorschach, "Why Do Universities Have Museums?"

¹⁸ Raicovich, *Culture Strike*, 30, and Dana, *The Gloom of the Museum*, as paraphrased by Raicovich, Laura.

¹⁹ Sitzia, "The Ignorant Art Museum."

elitism is not only the very nature of museum work being an engagement with rarefied art and objects, but also the demographics of those working in the museum and determining the relevance and value of certain knowledge. A recent comprehensive Mellon Foundation study of diversity in museum staff found that of those in leadership positions or those in positions that “can be a pipeline to leadership positions” such as curatorial, conservation, and education roles, 84 percent are white, while only four percent are African American, six percent are Asian, and three percent are Hispanic. The study also found that the majority of curators and museum directors are male identifying.²⁰ Additionally, it is estimated that roughly 70% of all museum curators, directors, and educators hold at least one degree, and a little over a quarter hold a master’s degree.²¹ While statistics can hardly capture the scope of the matter, these staggering numbers indicate elitism within the institution is often rooted in the exclusionary makeup of staff.

As mentioned earlier, the implications of this can be damaging to the ways in which community members perceive museums. As curator and former museum director Nina Simon writes in her article “On White Privilege and Museums,” “whiteness is the language we use to describe what we show and the programs that we produce...whiteness is in the behaviors we expect of our visitors, volunteers, and staff members,” and ultimately, Simon notes, “the white privilege frame distorts the extent to which museums can represent and reflect the diversity of humanity.”²² One such example of this, wherein white stories are both the standard and the expectation in museums, communicates to diverse audiences that museums are actively othering them, marking their non-whiteness as illegitimate. Simon offers her experience: “I will

never forget walking through a major art institution in San Francisco and being shocked by the fact that work in the African...[section] was often labeled with modifiers like ‘beautiful,’ -words intended to legitimize that only exacerbated the sense that these objects were not legitimate artworks in their own right. I never saw comparable adjectives used in the European art labels at the museum.”²³ When museums claim inclusivity and diversity as central to their purpose, while their staffs, their modes of teaching and displaying art, and their engagement with surrounding communities signal that whiteness is driving the institutional narrative, museums begin to lose their credibility.

When we consider this notion of credibility, it is hard not to circle back to neutrality. Remembering that many of the earliest museums in this country exercised no overt political agenda other than an explicit association with the settler-colonial project, what does this mean for the contemporary museum? The museum as we know it today is entirely wrapped up in the patriarchal, capitalist, and colonialist delineations of art collection, display, and knowledge production that first emerged in early examples like the Charleston Library Society. Because museums have historically been lauded as indispensable sites of art, cultural exchange, and public education, there has always been a deliberate positioning of the museum above the community and the audience. But, as museum educator Mike Murawski of the #MuseumsAreNotNeutral campaign writes, when museums “strive to remain ‘above’ the political and social issues that affect the lives” of their visitors, they undermine their potential to function as “relevant, socially-engaged spaces” in their communities.²⁴ Without claiming a political

²⁰ Westermann, Schonfeld, and Sweeney, “Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey 2018,” 2.

²¹ “Museum Curator Education Requirements.”

²² Simon, “On White Privilege and Museums.”

²³ Ibid, 22.

²⁴ Carlsson, “Should Museums Remain Impartial?”

agenda in any explicit terms, museums are constantly engaging in antiquated practices that inherently claim a side and ostracize the community. So what exactly does this look like in the museum? In recent years, questions of institutional neutrality (and in a sense, credibility) have proved more glaring at a number of prestigious American art museums.

In May 2020, following the brutal police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the Getty Museum, an expansive compound in Los Angeles founded by late oil tycoon and avid European art collector John Paul Getty, posted to its Instagram an evasive message about the museum's support of "a spirit of caring for one another," with no mention of George Floyd or police brutality. Hundreds of comments flooded the post, ranging from "the epitome of white privilege" and "disappointing and not enough" to "I want museums to be safe but you all are maintaining the values of the oppressors."²⁵ The museum responded with an apology, riddled with the kind of vague wording that has allowed it to avoid making any tangible commitments to institutional racial or social equity in the time since. Such an ambiguous statement is perhaps unsurprising coming from a museum like the Getty, positioned on a secluded hill in the affluent Los Angeles neighborhood of Brentwood and steeped in the opulence of oil money. But what is particularly striking about this instance is the depth of institutional indifference it soon revealed; shortly after the post and subsequent apology by the museum, hundreds of museum visitors and current and former Getty employees penned a letter describing the museum as a place where "racism abounds," denouncing the museum's mission "to advance and share the world's visual art and cultural heritage for the benefit of all," as fraudulent, and among other things, noting that the museum refuses to acknowledge

that black lives matter.²⁶ The museum's attempt to remain neutral led to a powerful exposition of its most biased practices.

Albeit a different context and scale than the Getty Museum's situation, the Queens Museum's Art Space Sanctuary conflict offers another salient example of institutional neutrality. Following Donald Trump's election in 2016, as immigrants in the United States experienced increasing precarity, the museum's then-director, Laura Raicovich, formed a working group, Art Space Sanctuary. Because the museum is a progressive public institution located in one of the most ethnically diverse, densely populated urban areas in the country, Raicovich and others at the museum were concerned about the safety of certain visitors and employees amidst ever changing immigration policies. Informed by the practices of the 1980s sanctuary movement in Latin America, the Art Space Sanctuary group assembled in an attempt to "communicate that cultural spaces were, in fact, for everyone" and to "signal the cultural sector's support for the vulnerable people who worked in the museum [many of whom were DACA recipients] as well as visited."²⁷ When Raicovich proposed the Queens Museum formally sign on as a "sanctuary museum," the museum's board of trustees unanimously rejected the idea based on the notion that as a public institution [it] should not, and indeed could not, 'take sides' in the political debates around immigration." In essence, the board rejected a pro-immigrant stance in order to maintain absolute neutrality.²⁸ In the case of both the Getty Museum and the Queens Museum, these institutions disregarded the needs and experiences of their audiences and in some cases of their own employees, to remain impartial on urgent, devastating issues.

²⁵ Getty Museum, Instagram.

²⁶ Stromberg, "Getty Responds to Open Letter Accusing Museum of Racial Bias and Insensitivity."

²⁷ Raicovich, Culture Strike, 5–6.

²⁸ Ibid, 27.

Now it is more clear, perhaps, why, as I mentioned in the very first paragraph, Strike MoMA activists felt inclined to criticize MoMA's tendency to "invoke the museum as a homogenous community with a unified interest."²⁹ When museums push this narrative of shared interest and collectivity, they erase the lived experiences of visitors who do not see themselves reflected in the exhibits, of museum workers who feel tokenized and unsafe, and of communities that feel overlooked and undervalued by these institutions. In the words of Laura Raicovich, "neutrality is a veil for wielding power."³⁰ And in an attempt to make these lived experiences visible and to lift the veil on the power wielded by museums, artists, activists, and former museum workers have committed themselves to continual protest. Sit-ins, walking tours, "de-occupations," and art installations staged in lobbies, courtyards, and surrounding neighborhoods have been signaling to museums for decades that the veil is lifting. Activist groups like the Art Workers Coalition, which submitted "13 demands" in 1969 to MoMA's then-director Bates Lowry, "calling for greater inclusion of African American, Latinx, and other marginalized artists in the Museum's programming," and the Guerilla Art Action Group, which "staged a 'bloodbath' in the [MoMA] lobby" during the Vietnam War to draw attention to the Museum board's ties to the war industry, laid the foundation for decades of social and political protest in museum spaces.³¹

A recent, wholly compelling example of contemporary activism is the Indigenous-led protests of artist Sam Durant's work, *Scaffold* (2012) when it arrived at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 2017. Durant, a white man whose art deals primarily with "the reification of white hegemony," installed *Scaffold*, "a two-story wood-and-steel construction vaguely

reminiscent of a chunky play structure," in the Walker's Sculpture Garden after its successful run in an esteemed German exhibition, *documenta*.³² Despite its play structure-like appearance, the sculpture was actually Durant's rendering of a combination of gallows designs "used in seven US government-sanctioned executions carried out from 1859 through 2006," with particular attention paid to "the executions of seven different condemned people or groups," one of which was the Mankato, Minnesota "execution of the Dakota thirty-eight in 1862."³³ In his artist's statement, Durant explained "The Mankato Massacre represents the largest mass execution in the history of the United States, in which 38 Dakota men were executed by order of President Lincoln in the same week that the Emancipation Proclamation was signed."³⁴ Almost immediately following the work's installation, "which [was] situated on the unceded Dakota land of the Twin Cities," both Durant and the museum were "met with intense public outcry led by many local Indigenous groups...for not having the foresight to understand that exhibiting a work depicting the history of pain and trauma inflicted on Dakota ancestors by the US government, and still resonant in their lives today, would reenact that suffering yet again."³⁵ Discussing the protests in *Culture Strike*, Laura Raicovich writes "for a museum to underestimate or be blindsided by such a response in 2017 is unacceptable. It is another example of cultural amnesia that repeatedly reinscribes intergenerational racial and ethnic pain. The Walker has long operated in Minneapolis, and in this context it should have been abundantly clear that some community work needed to be done in advance of such an installation. Things might have gone quite differently if there had been a space of trust and discussion between the museum and the

²⁹ Strike MoMA, "Diversity of Tactics, Diversity of Aesthetics."

³⁰ Raicovich, "Museums Are Never Neutral."

³¹ "MoMA through Time."

³² Raicovich, *Culture Strike*, 64.

³³ *Ibid*, 32.

³⁴ Durant, Artist Statement Regarding *Scaffold* at the Walker Art Center.

³⁵ Raicovich, *Culture*, 66.

Indigenous communities that surround it.”³⁶ After several organized protests at the Walker, both Durant and the museum issued apologies and Durant transferred the intellectual property of *Scaffold* to Dakota elders in the community so that they could determine what happened to the sculpture. Ultimately, they decided to burn it.

In another contemporary, highly publicized example, look to the ongoing Strike MoMA protests. After it became clear that several of the museum’s board members—namely Board Chairman Leon Black, an investor with deep financial and social ties to Jeffrey Epstein, the financier and convicted sex-offender who pleaded guilty to the trafficking and sexual abuse of dozens of minors before committing suicide while in custody in 2019—had problematic financial and political affiliations, artists and former museum workers began a 10-week “deoccupation” of the museum.³⁷ Conceptual artist Michael Rakowitz was one of 150 artists to speak on the matter in February 2021, saying “MoMA has refused comment on every story that has emerged about Leon Black. The museum stays silent while we as artists are asked to speak. Beyond speaking, I look forward to collectively imagining an ecosystem that does not enlist our content to go on display in institutions whose board members create the very conditions in the world that many of us are devoted to dismantling.”³⁸ Black ultimately stepped down in April 2021, followed shortly after by a rare public comment from MoMA citing Black as an “outstanding”

leader.³⁹ This is, perhaps, a euphemistic way of saying the museum has benefited greatly from Black’s financial contributions. Though the mounting pressure from protests throughout the spring of 2021 seems to have contributed heavily to Black’s resignation, the board is not rid of tainted trustees, and the Strike MoMA activists continue to disseminate resources and promote a radical, joyful reimagining of the arts ecosystem.⁴⁰

While Strike MoMA protestors gathered outside the MoMA following the publication of their letter to director Glenn Lowry, one activist said earnestly to an interviewer, “we’re genuinely interested in separating art from fuckery.”⁴¹ So how do we go about realizing this admirable goal? How do museums become transparent and socially and politically engaged spaces? Ones that grant power to the public rather than to the state and the bourgeoisie (à la Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s arguments on cultural hegemony)?⁴² As Nina Simon writes about museums and community, “connecting with communities means making conscious choices that push your institution towards being more of a ‘third place.’”⁴³ A third place—defined in Ray Oldenburg’s foundational 1989 book *The Great Good Place* as the social surroundings separate from the first place social environment, the home, and the second place social environment, the workplace, or the “anchors of community life” that “facilitate and foster broader, more creative interaction,”—is exactly what most museums are *not*.⁴⁴ For museums to

³⁶ Raicovich, *Culture Strike*, 66.

³⁷ Pogrebin and Goldstein, “Leon Black to Step Down as MoMA Chairman.”

³⁸ Rakowitz as quoted by Pogrebin and Goldstein, “Leon Black to Step Down as MoMA Chairman.”

³⁹ “MoMA Replaces Leon Black, Calls Him ‘Outstanding.’”

⁴⁰ To see the resources produced by the Strike MoMA working group, check out their website: <https://www.strikemoma.org>

⁴¹ Bishara, “In a Letter to MoMA’s Director, Activists Declare Plan to Protest Inside Museum.”

⁴² The relationship between museums and cultural hegemony, and specifically Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*,

deserve significantly more than a parenthesized reference. Because it is not within the capacity of this particular article, look to these diverse sources for further reading on a topic and relationship I am unable to discuss here: Weber and Carrillo-Perez, “The Museum Space as a Site of Counter-Hegemony (?)” and Grek, “In and against the Museum.”

⁴³ Simon, “Eight Other Ways to ‘Connect with Community.’”

⁴⁴ Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* and Myers, “Going Home: Essays, Articles, and Stories in Honour of the Andersons,” 37.

achieve this level of relevance within a neighborhood or community, these institutions must begin dismantling the problematic histories and ideologies that uphold their power and elitism. Museums can no longer afford to exist as temples of knowledge when this positionality is so steeped in exclusion, elitism, and a general misunderstanding of the needs of those creating and engaging with art. And to begin this work, museums must be radically self-reflective about their own practices and about how they define the “community” they seek to engage.

In my own experience at the Weisman Art Museum, the public teaching museum of the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, the museum has done well to stretch the bounds of community engagement. Although the Weisman’s university affiliation positions it in a separate financial category than that of, say, the Getty Museum or the Queens Museum, university museums like the Weisman still exist to “increase and diffuse knowledge” to public audiences in the same way many larger, independent museums intend to.⁴⁵ The museum’s Target Studio for Creative Collaboration, a studio and exhibition space for interdisciplinary collaborations between the museum and the diverse Twin Cities and Minnesota communities has led to a meaningful increase in reciprocal relationships between the museum and the broader community. The project I have had the fortune of working on, SEEN @ WAM, is a collaborative exhibition between incarcerated artists in Minnesota and multidisciplinary artists across the Twin Cities, which has prompted fascinating conversations with the incarcerated artists about the role of museums in their own lives.⁴⁶ Here, the Weisman makes a compelling case for museum exhibits as modes of institutional and community reflection. In centering the voices of

incarcerated artists, the museum centers an uncomfortable truth: For most who visit and work in the museum, this show is a direct and unfamiliar confrontation with both a violent, dehumanizing carceral system and with the deep-rooted biases people have about those who exist within this system. Speaking on his hopes for the exhibit in an email, one of the participating incarcerated artists, Jeff, said, “I want the viewer to see me in my totality. I want them to see the humanity expressed in my art juxtaposed to the narrow description of my conviction so that the viewer is forced to wrestle with how that makes them feel, think. ‘How can this art I admire, and see a compelling, poignant slice of humanity and intelligence expressed in, come from what I normally, comfortably view as insignificant, unworthy, less than human?’”⁴⁷

In another example, artist Theaster Gates’s part-conceptual art project/part-museum Stony Island Arts Bank, has proven a prime example of the ways in which museums can grant communities power and autonomy to preserve and engage with their history. A formerly vibrant community savings and loan bank on Chicago’s South Side that sat defunct for several decades, Stony Island Arts Bank was purchased and renovated by Gates’s non-profit Rebuild Foundation “as a space for neighbors to preserve, access, reimagine and share their heritage.”⁴⁸ The museum has become a destination for black artists, scholars, curators, and collectors to research and engage with South Side history, and provides the neighborhood with amenities like free weekly screenings of “films by and about black people,”

⁴⁵ Rorschach, “Why Do Universities Have Museums?”

⁴⁶ To read more about SEEN@WAM or the Weisman’s Target Studio, visit the space’s website: <https://wam.umn.edu/education/target-studio-for-creative-collaboration/>.

⁴⁷ To read some of Jeff’s work, explore the website of We Are All Criminals (WAAC), the non-profit organization in residency at the Weisman for the SEEN @ WAM project: <https://www.weareallcriminals.org/jeff/>

⁴⁸ “Stony Island Arts Bank.”

free weekly musical performances, and ample work and hang-out spaces.⁴⁹

These examples underscore why museums have persisted as cultural beacons and hubs for cross-cultural engagement and practice. There too, however, is a reason why these institutions are dangerously close to disappearing themselves. Many museums are so ideologically and financially tethered to systems of oppression that they are steadily ostracizing their visitors. If we want to, in no uncertain terms, separate art from fuckery, we must begin to transform the museum into a human-centered space—flatten hierarchies, trust the public and its diverse funds of knowledge, open lines of communication for feedback, allocate more spaces for rest and conversation, and dismantle the walls, perhaps both figuratively and literally, to make way for a new kind of museum.

⁴⁹ “Stony Island Arts Bank - Project Items - Theaster Gates.”

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