

The New York Times | <http://nyti.ms/22oqdrp>

ART & DESIGN

Making Museums Moral Again

By HOLLAND COTTER MARCH 17, 2016

IN THE PAST, when people wondered how to live moral lives, they could look to the saints, or take their questions to church. Today, some of us might instead turn our attention to art and the institutions that house it.

That's what several dozen artists did, for a related but different reason, last December during the United Nations climate talks in Paris. One afternoon, in a week when crucial policy negotiations were underway, hundreds of environmental activists gathered outside the Louvre to protest the museum's sponsorship ties to two of the world's largest oil companies. Among the demonstrators were members of politically minded art collectives like Occupy Museums and Not an Alternative, from the United States, and Liberate Tate, from England.

Carrying open black umbrellas that spelled out the phrase "Fossil Free Culture," most of them stayed in the plaza around the museum's glass pyramid, singing and reading position statements. Meanwhile, inside the museum, another action was in progress. Ten performers poured an oily liquid onto the atrium floor and walked barefoot through it, creating a chaotic pattern of footprints before the police moved in.

The Louvre performance was one of a growing number of protests recently directed at large international art institutions, among them the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Some museums were urged to stop taking money from ethically dubious corporate or personal sources, including board members who deny that climate change is underway. Others were called out for condoning, if not actively supporting, inhumane labor practices, like those imposed on migrant workers building new Guggenheim and Louvre franchises in Abu Dhabi.

Comparable protests in the past were usually aimed directly at corporations or at major universities, like Harvard, with elaborate corporate connections. That museums are now targets says something about their newly perceived status. Once considered standoffish, genteel and politically marginal, they are now viewed as being emblematically engaged players within the power network of global capitalism. And some are seen as using that status badly.

Public art museums have long engaged in the exchange of cultural and corporate capital. Museums get money, and in exchange, corporations get to look somewhat nice. In 1983, the Whitney Museum of American Art opened a Midtown branch that was paid for, and named for, the Philip Morris tobacco company, which for decades had steadfastly denied that smoking causes lung cancer. The Whitney escaped sustained censure for its alliance, partly because America was still a cigarette culture, but also because museums still retained an aura of moral superiority left over from a more romantic era. They were still temples of art, repositories for the creative best that humanity had to offer.

Few people see them that way anymore. In the 21st century, greater and greater wealth is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. And a significant number of those hands are snapping up investment-worthy contemporary art. Much of the art in these competing, market-vetted private and corporate collections is being consigned to museum premises. Aggressively shaping themselves into this new dynamic, museums have, in turn, adopted corporate

strategies: relentless expansion, user-friendliness, slick advertising.

To some degree, the museums have benefited, at least financially. Urban museums that have mastered these strategies most successfully are crowded places — destination brands; busy, event-driven entertainment centers. But as generators of life lessons, shapers of moral thinking, explainers of history, they no longer matter, because they're not asking people to look for any of that.

Could anything change this dynamic? Maybe telling the truth about history, including their own, could. Periodically, in past decades, they've been forced to do this. Such was the case in the 1960s, when a group of antiwar, pro-labor artists, loosely united under the name Art Workers' Coalition, connected the dots linking some members of the Museum of Modern Art's board of trustees to the governmental and economic forces backing the Vietnam War, including companies that manufactured napalm.

The artists staged guerrilla performances inside MoMA and designed one of the most potent art images, a poster using a photograph of the dead at My Lai, with the caption "Q. And babies? A. And babies." The museum stonewalled, and the moment passed. But the reality that museums are, or can be, ethically and politically compromised had been exposed.

It was exposed again in 1969, when the Met mounted the exhibition "Harlem on My Mind." The Met's stated purpose was to attract African-American visitors, a neglected constituency, to the museum. But actions speak louder than words. The show consisted of photomurals, slides, films, texts and audio recordings, but no art, in the traditional sense, at all. The takeaway was that the Met had deemed no work by Harlem artists worthy of display. In the view of some visitors, the show had inadvertently betrayed the curators' real feelings about their target audience. And members of that audience pushed back.

Black artists picketed the show, and soon afterward took their activist anger to other New York museums. (This history is fully documented in Susan

E. Cahan's new book, "Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power.") By organizing the show, the Met had, in ways it could not have predicted, raised political consciousness about de facto racial segregation and exclusion in American art and its institutions. That segregation would loosen only gradually, in what is still very much a work in process. But a crucial impetus for progress can be traced to that exhibition.

Exhibitions come and go; displays of work from a museum's permanent collection are on view all the time. Supervised by staff curators, these exhibits are the true indicators of how an institution thinks about art as evidence of history. Yet even in a museum like the Met, whose globe-spanning collections are rich and deep enough to yield many narratives, and opportunities to revise, correct and expand these narratives, very little attempt at exploratory truth-telling can be found.

The Met's Egyptian galleries are among its top audience attractions, partly because ancient burial customs allowed unusual numbers of artifacts from daily life to survive. Wall labels explain that the objects were meant to reconstitute and celebrate the pleasures of earthly existence. What the labels do not say, though they could, is that this art reflects a profound fear of mortality on the part of a slave-supported ruling elite. The slaves themselves had no afterlife, except in the form of continuing service to their masters. The funerary art of ancient Egypt called on extraordinary skill and beauty to ensure that domination and servitude would be immortal conditions.

The museum's Classical Greek and Roman galleries are also full of fascinating objects, yet similarly refuse to tell a sociopolitical story. The word "classical" has roots in a Latin term for a Roman tradition of calling on citizens to assemble in hierarchical formation, ranked by bloodline and wealth, for military action. In its modern usage, the word continues to imply a qualitative ranking of objects and ideas in categories of superior or less-than. The Met doesn't tell us, though it could, that for Greeks of the Classical age, the world beyond Greece itself failed the quality test.

We are not told of the intense xenophobia that, as the art historian J. J. Pollitt once noted, shaped ancient Greek life, conjuring an image of populations outside Greece's borders — Persians, for example — as dark, disease-carrying agents of chaos, an image often applied in many cultures to immigrants today. Greek Classical art is an embodiment of ideals to be admired, but it is also an assertion of ethnic exceptionalism in a barbaric, Other-filled world.

At the Met's Fifth Avenue building, the European medieval art is mostly installed in one large hall. (There is much more at the Cloisters in Washington Heights.) A scattering of individual objects united by no overarching curatorial theme, the installation seems based on an assumption that visitors will have a context for its largely religious Christian imagery. That may have been so generations ago, but no longer. To many visitors today, figures of saints and Bible stories are as arcane as Egyptian gods and myths.

This leaves forms of art that helped create and police the moral universe we inhabit today inaccessible. It's an art about being saved or damned, with religious authorities wielding the judicial or executive power to decide which. Clerics of many religions are still making those edicts, with dire consequences for the lives and psyches of millions of people.

All these interpretive readings are incomplete, debatable, correctable. But all point to the indisputable fact that, throughout history, art has created and reflected realities that remain deterministic. The Met, like many of our most powerful and visible museums, doesn't tell such stories in its permanent galleries, and hasn't in the disappointingly traditionalist inaugural display in the Breuer building it is leasing from the Whitney. But a recent temporary exhibition at the Met, "Kongo: Power and Majesty," did.

Using a spectacular array of sculptures and textiles produced by the Kongo peoples of Central Africa from the 16th through the 19th centuries, the show detailed an African-European encounter that began as a fruitful

exchange — an ambassador from the Kongo court traveled to papal Rome — and disintegrated into a nightmare of white-on-black exploitation. The curator Alisa LaGamma, head of the Met’s department of the arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, fleshed out this narrative with objects but also, more important, with words. Her wall texts pulled no punches.

During four centuries of the slave trade, she wrote, “some 20 million Africans were subjected to the most massive deportation in history.” While thousands of the Kongo were shipped across the Atlantic, forced labor at home led to “the decimation of the remaining population by disease, the reduction of the agricultural system to subsistence, the dismantling of existing commercial networks and the abandonment of traditional vocations such as ironworking and woodcarving.”

“From the first moment of contact with Europe,” she writes, “exploitation of its wealth ushered in foreign intervention on a massive scale that has continued unabated into the present.”

I’ve rarely read a text so forthrightly polemical in an exhibition organized by the Met. I don’t remember ever reading anything like it in any of the permanent galleries. But it is a model for the kind of truth-telling approach that museums could, and should, be taking to art: factual, incisive, politically astute, connecting the past to the present and inviting argument.

My sense is that such a tactic could encourage viewer “engagement,” to invoke a term that buzzes around the fraught subject of audience-building. It could wake people up; compel them to stop, look and read when they might have passed by; and prompt them to see that art isn’t just about objects — it’s about ideas, histories and ethical philosophies that they may have a stake in, and an opinion about. It seems to me that one point of museum programming is to get people to think, as opposed to endlessly snapping selfies.

Of course, the “truth” brings risks. There are truths we don’t want to know, and so-called truths can be applied damagingly to one person or culture,

but not another. What about beauty? Will magnificent objects suffer if they are found to have unbeautiful back stories? Many objects in museums fall into this category.

If museum officials begin to sense that visitors are becoming more involved in what the curators are saying and thinking, not just what they're showing, maybe they will come to feel a more immediate stake in the preoccupations of audiences.

Local artists, for example, make up a substantial percentage of regular visitors to New York museums. Gentrification, and the relentless shrinking of affordable places to live, is a subject heavy on their minds. In the last two decades, it has transformed Manhattan into a cultural empowerment zone for the wealthy and the tourist trade. (The activist-curator Nato Thompson provides a vivid account of how this has happened in "Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century.") Museums are not passive inhabitants of that zone. They've helped to create it, and perpetuate it. In so doing, they've gone against the best interests of some of their most devoted customers and contributors — artists — and remained silent.

Gentrification makes for a ruinous moral ecology. When the artists go, resistance goes, and rebellion is the foundation of interesting art and a moral life. Fortunately, some artists, like those of Occupy Museums and Not an Alternative, stay light on their feet and don't stray far. I savor the prospect, any day now, of glancing out a window at the new Whitney, or gazing across MoMA's atrium, or walking through one of the Met's little-traveled permanent-collection galleries, and, suddenly, there they are.

A version of this article appears in print on March 17, 2016, on page F6 of the New York edition with the headline: Making Museums Moral.