Inclusion and Transparency Have the Power to Shift the Art Industry

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Introduction

The art world is undergoing rapid changes. There has been a shift in the art business from being dominated by the wealthy (or the patriarchy) to becoming more inclusive. More people have been invited to bring their own styles, approaches, and perspectives to the art business, or so it seems. Artist Destinee Ross-Sutton remarks, “In the past few years, many deep-rooted ideas and systems have been exposed, and the art world has not remained untouched by these revelations. We are getting glimpses into the inner workings of the world’s institutions, and the people, structures, and social constructs that hold them up” (Ross-Sutton). Who is behind the buying, selling, and displaying of art? What is the process by which museums and galleries decide what type of art and artists to put on display in their exhibits and why do they do so? A vast portion of works created to inspire and be viewed by the public still sit in the homes of the wealthy. They are displayed as a means of impressing without a genuine understanding of the context in which they were made. Artists' works are being stolen by their art dealers, museums are still saturated with white male artists, and historical artifacts are wrongfully displayed. Although the art world is changing, people who occupy the top positions remain the same. Art acquisition is tied up in a web of questionable practices that can be hard to unravel. How can the art world work its way out of these practices? Though art institutions may seem like just a tourist attraction, a fun date night, or a photo op, they hold our history and have a huge impact on how we understand it. In this essay are examples of promises unfulfilled and models of how we can rectify the past of large art institutions and do what's best for the public by including new people in the conversation and addressing their messy history.

Industry Research

The art industry is massive and is growing rapidly. In 2022 alone, the US art market brought in a record-breaking $30.2 billion. The United States is home to 35,000 museums and in an article published by the Statista Research Department stated: " In 2022, the market size of the museum industry in the United States was estimated at over 11 billion U.S. dollars, growing by roughly seven percent compared to 2021" (Statista). However, according to the cultural economist and founder of Arts Economics, Dr. Clare McAndrew of the *2022 Art Basel and UBS Global Art Market Report*, "sales by dealers and auctioneers reached $65.1 billion, soaring by 29% from 2020". Despite the fact that museums are visited by millions of people from all over the world, they do not generate a large amount of revenue from their average patrons. Instead, they have a much greater reliance on donations and endowments to generate their income (The Art Basel). Many of these donations come from well-known businesses, such as Apple, Amazon, Disney, and so on. The largest donations, however, come from private donors and trustees (Pogrebin). A trustee is an individual person or member of a board given control or powers of administration. It is easy to see how someone on the museum's board can have an influence on its very nature, considering that they contribute so much to its existence. Meanwhile, galleries rely mainly on taking a percentage of the sales of their artworks to generate revenue. Unlike museums, they are private institutions that serve as intermediaries between artists and collectors. Yet, these artworks may end up in museums since the vast majority of the art collections in most American museums are a result of gifts from private collectors. Each business operates in a unique manner, but ultimately effects the public in very similar ways. Meaning that it is necessary to understand their foundations and who is involved in their operation.

Most, if not all, billion-dollar industries are run by the patriarchy, and the art industry is no exception. I believe this plays a significant role in how the public receives such institutions and what they learn from them, as museums specifically are curated by the old guard. Recently museums and galleries have been facing backlash from claims of stolen works to fraud, lack in diversity, and poor treatment of employees. Perhaps the lack of diversity within the very foundation of the indusrty is to blame for these disappointments.

This essay will focus on statistics from New York City's art institutions, home to 145 museums and approximately 1,400 galleries and zeroing in on the top three museums which bring in over $410 million a year and 10.5 million visitors a year: the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET), and The Whitney Museum of American Art. The MET alone has been dealing with repatriation issues the past few years. They have been called out for the acquisition of unprovenanced works. At the MoMA, billionaire and a chairman of the musuem, Leon Black was forced to step down "after widespread pressure from artists and activists over his ties to the convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein"(Aima). Lasty, in 2020 The Whitney Museum of American Art had to cancel a show after backlash from black artists who discovered that their work had been acquired by the museum without their knowledge. The same museum also faced weeks of protests organized by Decolonize this Place of employees and patrons pushing for the "resignation of the vice chairman, Warren B. Kanders, who activists said was not fit to serve as a trustee because his company, Safariland, sold law enforcement and military supplies, including tear gas" that was used on migrants at the Mexican American border (Aima). With such a foundation in place it is important we evaluate it to learn how it effects the public and what can be done to better serve them.

The Global Art - Magnus Resch, www.magnusresch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/GlobalArtGalleryReport2016byMagnusResch.pdf. Accessed 9 May 2023.

Corruption in Galleries

Respresentation

In an interview with Katharine Overgard, Director of Franklin Parrasch Gallery, she stated that out of the thirty art dealers she knew in the New York City area, only four were women, one was Black, and none were under forty. It is generally observed that galleries are operated largely by older white men with a taste for art created by artists who look like them. The majority of galleries represent a large number of white artists, using artists of color to appear diverse, but showing them only once or twice a year. Galleries like Jack Shainman Gallery or Museums such as the recently opened, RubellMuseum, owned by white families that invest in art by persons of color, but they reap the rewards of the artist's hard work. When asked if the gallery is making efforts to put the works of these artists in the hands of buyers who would truly connect with the intentions behind their work, using the work of African American artist Sylvia Snowden as an example, Overgard explained, “I’m particularly interested in placing the work of Black artists with black collectors but, more importantly with people who can care for the works and or have connections with museums that will help us amplify the artist herself.” This, unfortunately

aren’t often people of color (Thompson). In an article by Destinee Ross-Sutton titled “How to Responsibly Collect the Work of Black Artists," stated “Black people have always collected Black art, appreciated it, and cherished it, even when it received little recognition” meaning a lack of black collectors isn't the problem but, a lack in connections to higher organizations (Ross-Sutton). The cycle is hard to break, if an art dealer represents a Black artist and two collectors are interested in a piece one a wealthy Black woman who owns a clothing business and another, a white woman whose husband is on the MoMA board, it is in the represented artist best interest it is sold to the woman with the best connections.

When gallery owners choose to represent artists of color within their galleries, other hurdles need to be overcome. As explained in an article by Howardena Pindell entitled "Advice to the Young Black Artist," Pindell explains that "There are a variety of shenanigans that take place in the art world. I have had dealers who have stolen my money. I have had dealers refuse to return my work. The dealers I have worked with have asked me for exclusive representation but refused to list me as one of their artists.” She goes on to explain her experiences as a Black woman in the gallery industry and gallery owners wanting her work but excluding her from the process (Pindell). There is a fate all too well known for artists; they entrust their artwork to galleries without a very clear understanding of the process. Pindell encourages them to educate themselves on the financial and aesthetic aspects of the process. She recommends artists “keep in touch with dealers and individuals who hold (their) work, particularly if they don’t have a gallery.” However, this doesn't often happen, the work is put in the hands of the highest bidder without regard for the artist (Pindell).

Double Dealing Dealers

Naive artists' work can be used as pawns in million-dollar scams and have no clue. In November 2021, art dealer Inigo Philbrick was found guilty of federal wire fraud charges in the New York criminal court. According to *The Art Newspaper*, “Philbrick admitted selling the same works to multiple investors and then defaulting on loans.” The dealer was known for having a keen eye for contemporary art, but in 2019, the public lost interest in the works he was selling (Adam). Perhaps the decline in interest had to do with the art and artists lacking diversity in a climate craving just that. Nonetheless, to keep up appearances and fund his lavish lifestyle of chartering private jets and hundred-thousand-dollar wrist watches “[he] misrepresented the ownership of certain works for his benefit, sold shares of works to multiple investors for totals that exceeded 100%, used some of those works to secure loans for himself and forged consignment documents.” Philbrick's greed cost him a twenty-year sentence and tarnished the names of smaller artists whose work was involved in these scams. His attorney states, “the [art] industry is corrupt from top to bottom. I suspect many more cases like this would appear if the art world were investigated thoroughly” (Cassady). Due to art dealers like Philbrick, there are common misconceptions that gallerists live lavish lives using the money acquired through sales, but most money goes towards maintaining rent, attending art fairs, and putting on shows. *Art Business News* assures “the overwhelming majority of gallerists aren’t in it for the money. Instead, they are in this line of business for one reason – because they are passionate about art. And that’s what helps them navigate the booming art world and the competitive art market – passion and dedication.” The bittersweet problem in this world is that some wealthy white dealers and collectors truly care about the voices of underrepresented groups and express the appreciation they invest in their works (Kendall)(Timms). Now the artists get paid but, did they

envision their works residing in the collections of the very people who oppress them? Two gallery employees recount their time at an auction for Indigenous peoples' art:

> There were about three speeches and an award was given to an artist of Indigenous descent. By the second speech no one in the gallery was listening, we were probably the youngest in the room and the only ones with respect for the event. I mean everyone there was white, elderly, and most likely funded the event so who was going to stop them? (Thompson, 2022)

Franklin-Wallis, Oliver. “In Search of Inigo Philbrick, the Disappearing Art Dealer.” British GQ, 6 May 2020, www.gq-magazine.co.uk/culture/article/inigo-philbrick.

Museums

Display and Repatriation

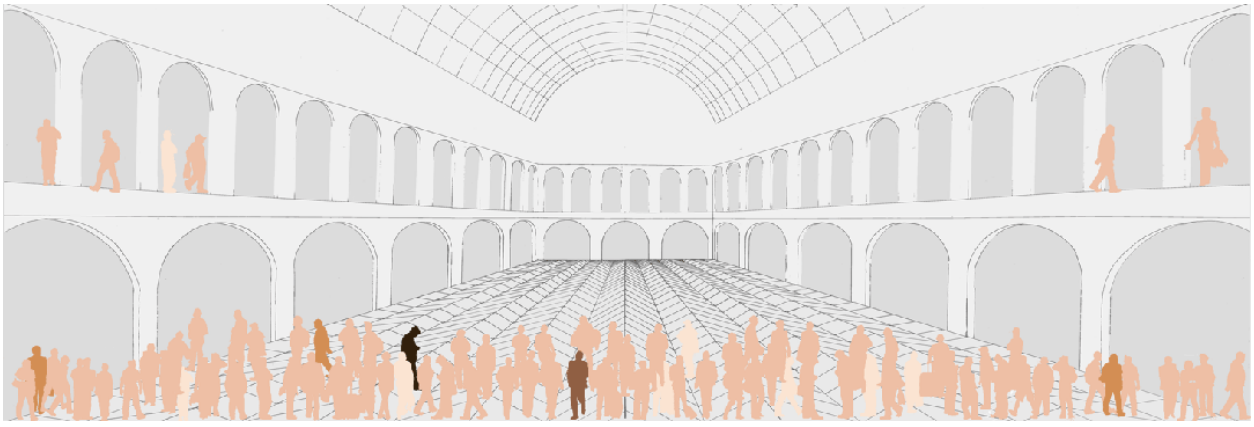
This is a small example of the kinds of misunderstandings and biases that are prevalent when it comes to buying art. It has been reported recently that more than a thousand objects at The Met have been linked to antiquity smugglers. For example, in the Egyptian galleries, you will find that many of the pieces lack provenance but are credited to a few donors instead. Some

of these donors have recently been accused or convicted of antiquities crimes, and it is a very complicated problem as it is possible that they were unaware of these crimes when they donated the antiquities. In the art market, there has been a huge issue of theft for years (NPR and Nayyar). The objects go from looters to several middlemen, then they are sold to a dealer, who then sells them to a collector, and so forth. In 1970, the United Nations Convention against the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Cultural Property, which prohibits the illicit import, export, and transfer of cultural property, making several of these looters, dealers, and collectors liable for their actions was passed. The large institutions that hold these objects today do not seem to be accountable regarding the complicated histories behind their collection. Instead of explaining these histories to their visitors, they gloss over them completely rather than explaining what they hold. In their book, "Representing Africa in American Art Museums: A Century of Collecting and Display," Kathleen Bickford Berzock and Christa Clarke explore a century of misrepresentation of African art in American museums. African art and artwork belonging to hundreds of colonized communities were acquired through colonization and then donated to large institutions such as The Met, The Art Institute of Chicago, The Seattle Art Museum, and several others that were just like them and displayed in an inaccurate way (Berzock and Clarke). There are some museums, such as the Brooklyn Museum, which have taken steps to heal the past by bringing in curators who can assess the original works that were displayed in their African art exhibitions, but most museums simply de-installed their African art exhibitions. For change to occur in the art industry, actions such as these must be taken first, not statements that tell the public they'll deal with the problem when convenient.

In the majority of museums, European art remains at the center of the focus, making it the top priority in terms of focus. *Hyperallergic* has released studies "conducted by a group of

mathematicians, statisticians, and art historians at Williams College…the researchers surveyed the collections of 18 major US museums to quantify the gender, ethnic, and racial composition of the artists represented in their collections showing that 85% of the artists in 18 major museums in the US are white and 87% of them are men as of 2019". A New York-based artist and data journalist, Mona Chalabi, asks the question, "Who are you here to see?" (Bishara).

When visiting museums, visitors are often searching for big names such as Monet, DaVinci, and Hopper (Bashara). All of these artists have one thing in common: The artists are white men. When it comes to non-European art which was produced before the colonial period, there is a common narrative, these works are organized thematically in a way that places a heavy emphasis on primitivism, and the story of European art is a Hegelian narrative in which art and culture progress over time. African masks and East Asian paintings at the moment are only steppingstones to the great works of Picasso and Van Gogh in the current frame of Western art movements.



Hyperallergic, 15 Aug. 2022, https://hyperallergic.com/501999/artists-in-18-major-us-museums-are-85-white-and-87-male-study-says/

"Chalabi's illustration of the representation of women in an average museum collection: of every 100 artworks at an average US museum collection, only 12 are by women. 11 of the women are white, and one is Asian " (Bashara).

Hyperallergic, 15 Aug. 2022, https://hyperallergic.com/501999/artists-in-18-major-us-museums-are-85-white-and-87-male-study-says/

"The composition of a US museum collection, if it was to represent the entire population. 189 figures would need to be added: 79 white women; 26 Latinx women; 18 black women; seven Asian women; five women of another race/ethnicity; 22 Latinx men; 16 black men; 12 white men; and four men of another race/ethnicity" (Bishara).

This begs the question: Who are museums for? In her 2019 TEDx Talk entitled "Museum in Progress: Decolonizing Museums," Hannah Mason Macklin, Manager of Interpretation and Engagement at the Columbus Museum, realized that as a Black woman she was perpetuating white supremacist, colonialist values by simply doing business as usual. In Macklin's opinion, museums tend to devalue and distort the cultures of people negatively affected by Western colonialism through the stories and histories they present. People of non-European descent may find this to be a depressing experience, in which the colonizer is portrayed as the triumphant artist, and the colonized are only "primitive" ideas that have been "perfected" by white men (Mason-Macklin). In other words, it is a loss of cultural heritage. Nonwestern cultures and experiences are not being represented in an uplifting way but rather puts European ideals on top. Museums are geared towards affirming a hierarchical framework of European culture on the top and Nonwestern culture on the bottom. Museums are educational

centers; they are extremely influential in society and almost always an anticipated destination for tourists. Visitors believe information from museums is factually accurate, but in situations such as these, they are left with the wrong ideas about their world's heritage. Representation in galleries, looted goods, and Eurocentric framing all trickle down to what the viewer perceives as absolute culture and history (Bitgood). In the words of Macklin:

> Museums can be the building blocks of social healing… if our government can't face the legacy and trauma of colonialism why not museums… through honest acknowledgment and genuine collaboration, museums can become spaces of healing, connection, and progress (Mason-Macklin).

True acknowledgment is essential for the positive growth of Museums and the art market as a whole. It seems the attempts at change being made today are performative pacifiers that do not address the core issues within the industry.

NPR and Hannah Mason-Macklin , directors. Museum in Progress: Decolonizing Museums | Hannah Mason-Macklin | TEDxKingLincolnBronzeville. YouTube, YouTube, 9 Dec. 2019,

There is a pattern of disappointment embedded within the art world, all boiling down to the lack of diversity and transparency in the industry. In an interview with Charles Esche, museum

director, curator, and writer, he states, “re-imagine the museum, examine its collection and rewrite its histories. Given the fact that the institution owns a tiny part of the past, we can try to write the past in order to change the future” (Ault 151). I argue that museums hold much more than a “tiny part” of the past and its essential that the past be reframed to educate their patrons properly. In the past few years, a few examples of how this can be accomplished in a museum setting exist. It is important to remember that museums are arranged, and curators choose the stories that they want to tell about the objects on display. Claire Bishop’s “Free Your Mind,” though satire harbors several examples of how to remedy these issues, “Pablo Picasso's heady brew of female sexuality and tribal culture (at once idealized and menacing) is no longer presented as an unprecedented art historical rupture. Instead, the painting is contextualized with photographs of African masks” This would completely reframe the general public's understanding of the influence of African culture in today's society, but which curator would make this choice (Bishop)? Several of the Met's cultural departments are led by white curators, after digging into theses institutions staffing sites, I found majority of the MoMA's senior staff are also white, and only one person of color sits on The Whitney's board. The above list is only representative of New York's major art museums, not to mention the overwhelming number of galleries owned and operated by wealthy white art dealers in the city. An obvious pattern can be seen if we go back to Hyperallergic recent study, which states that artists at eighteen major US museums are 85% white and 87% male.

Foundational Issues

Nora Steinfeld’s “Deprovincializing the Museum” brings up Achille Mbembe’s idea of “frivolous ignorance,” this being “the looking away, the indifference, the tactics of

whitewashing, distorting, and disguising the violence," something that has been practiced by all participants in the museum, including the viewers (Sternfeld) (Mbembe). The Oakland Museum of California's Lori Fogarty highlights a key player in the reimagining process. A change in the board and staff is essential to the development of the new museum (Fogarty). Claire Bishop also writes, "who works at museums… necessarily affects what gets exhibited and how it is presented, which in turn reaches different audiences" (Bishop). It is necessary to establish a diverse collective of people that are advocating for the non-European public, pushing to start a new dialogue that aims to release us from the straightjacket of formalist art history and address the museum's own failures in a way that educates the general public (Ault). This dilemma in the New York City art scene was spotted by Bill Aguado during his tenure as director of the Bronx Council of the Arts from 1987-1981. He was tired of Black and Latinx youth being excluded from the conversations around art, and he was even more frustrated with of the stigma surrounding the Bronx as a community. He notes, "Only people who had access to degrees were included and we're not always invited in these spaces." Noticing this, he pushed to get NYC youth involved making his main goal to serve the community and artists through creating programs such as art handler training programs, museum and gallery internships, and funding for artists. It is vital that I create spaces for people of color (POC) to not only be exposed to art but to also be able to learn about art, and thanks to people like Aguado, there has been a huge increase in POC graduating college with degrees in the arts. Unfortunately, this is only a small step in this large battle, once they've been taught, how can they apply it to the art world? This is where education comes into play. Often, for positions such as curators, for example, a master's degree or even a doctoral degree is required in order to move up the career ladder in this field. While some museums accept experience equivalent to a degree, opportunities for these

experiences are not always easy for people of color, especially since this isn't usually the environment they grow up in. A career in the arts may seem an unattainable dream for many people, especially in impoverished communities or public schools with low funding (Thompson).

Conclusion

Bill Aguado had the right idea in creating programs geared towards black and Latino artists as well as impoverished youth. The question is, what are the next steps to be taken now that we have implemented the new people? We can be real! There is a new generation of young people who embrace truth and admire it, even if the truth about museums isn't the most admirable, taking ownership is. It is possible to reframe art history in a way that edifies and uplifts all people, and in today's contemporary art scene. We should also to give artists a voice and give them spaces in which to express their creativity. The new generation will continue this progress once they are educated and feel empowered to speak out about these topics. With the rise of social media, artists are supporting each other more than ever. In this age when social media and the internet hold the key to all doors, people are in a much more difficult position to get away with anything they want. Additionally, there's an even greater need to get to know the artist themselves, which is true for all types of artists. Because of their authenticity, musicians like Doja Cat, Lil Nas X, and SZA are able to gain more streams (Golden). There is a personality behind their work that excites their fans, and this is equally true for visual artists, as they have a personality beyond their work. Museums can have an authentic voice! However, the only way this is possible is to include people from all backgrounds. Nothing can be created for all people without the involvement of all people. In the words of Claire Bishop,

> Gone is the narrative of progress that starts with European experimentation and ends with US triumphalism; good riddance to recent empty gestures toward multiculturalism and weak stabs at a global purview; Farewell to the museum-as-mall, where masterpieces meet mass marketing; buh-bye to forbidding expansions that serve neither the collection nor the public (Bishop).

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