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ARTFORUM

CASE STUDY

Christopher Glazek on Nan Goldin and the Sacklers

By Christopher Glazek (May 2019)



Nan Goldin (bottom right) with P.A.I.N. protesters in the Sackler Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, March 10, 2018. Photo: George Etheredge/New York Times/Redux.

ONE NIGHT IN THE SUMMER OF 2017, a few weeks before neo-Nazis marched in Charlottesville, I ran into a well-liked art adviser at a party on the second floor of New York’s Russian Samovar. We knew each other vaguely and greeted each other warmly. The well-liked art adviser asked what I was writing. I answered that I was working on an investigative piece with some relevance to the art world.

“Oh?”

I asked if the art adviser was familiar with the Sackler family.

“The Sacklers, yes, of course. I work with them sometimes.” The art adviser then added, whispering: “And yes, I know all about where the money comes from.”

“Interesting,” I said. “Most people don’t.”

“I know it comes from OxyContin.” The art adviser grinned, proud to be in the know about a piece of collector gossip, which was, after all, the art adviser’s job.

“Pretty bad stuff,” I suggested.

“Yeah, well. I mean, we’re all guilty right?” The art adviser’s tone shifted from contemplation to conciliation. “In the end, we’re all guilty.” It was a comforting mantra.

“Possibly,” I said, a bit dumbstruck. “But some of us are guiltier than others.”

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THE UNITED STATES IS in the throes of an opioid crisis—near the nadir, one hopes, though experts predict that as many as 50 percent of the deaths are yet to come, ensuring that the country’s prescription-drug epidemic will surpass the death toll from AIDS by a comfortable margin. Many of those whose lives have been shattered by prescription drugs or heroin got their start on OxyContin, the product that laid the groundwork for the present crisis. Purdue Pharma, owned and led by members of the Sackler family, came up with the lucrative idea of marketing powerful, long-acting, highly addictive opioids—a regimen previously restricted to terminally ill cancer patients—to millions of Americans suffering from minor ailments. Selling addictive drugs is extremely profitable, and although the Sacklers did not become quite as rich as Pablo Escobar, an entrepreneur to whom they are sometimes compared, those who shared the OxyContin proceeds became far richer than any other pharmaceutical clan, amassing a fortune estimated at greater than \$13 billion.

Alongside the opioid crisis, the American elite is also in the midst of an accountability crisis. It can be difficult now, in the spring of 2019, to recall how ordinary it was, just two years ago, to proudly associate with the Sacklers whose innovative, heartless profiteering bent the curve of human history and unleashed suffering on a biblical scale.

The reason it’s difficult to remember how things used to be is largely because of Nan Goldin. In January 2018, Goldin revealed her own addiction and announced the formation of an activist group, P.A.I.N. (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), in a portfolio in this magazine. Since then, through her art, her biography, and her deftly staged protests, Goldin has been the self-replenishing fuel that has kept the Sackler story from burning out. After an initial burst of attention in late 2017, the story had started to fizzle before Goldin’s group stormed New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art in March 2018, pelting the reflecting pool at the ancient Temple of Dendur with orange prescription bottles. Goldin has made sure that at least one domain over which the Sacklers sought influence has been forced to reckon with the morality of funding culture through sales of deadly opioids. By drawing sustained attention to the story, she likely helped persuade prosecutors, including attorneys general in Massachusetts and New York, to start naming Sackler family members personally in lawsuits. Those lawsuits have led to the release of smoking-gun emails that point toward the Sacklers’ ceaseless dedication—not just in the epidemic’s early years, but as recently as 2018—to pushing their opioids on the greatest number of patients, at the highest possible doses, for the longest possible duration.

Through words, images, and actions, Goldin has given the opioid epidemic something it had previously lacked—a coherent aesthetic of protest. What took so long? Why had there been no equivalent of ACT UP or Gran Fury this time around? The excuse often given, never very convincing, is that addicts are too unreliable to organize themselves, and that their families are too ashamed by the condition’s association with moral failure to do so on their behalf. Opioid addicts haven’t developed “class consciousness” as an aggrieved group with common interests. Perhaps the real problem, though, is that opioid activists haven’t had a leader, or a focal point for their anger. Goldin has supplied both, and she has gotten results. In 2018, the South London Gallery quietly returned a £125,000 gift from the Sacklers. Then, on March 19 of this year, London’s National Portrait Gallery rejected a £1 million grant from the family. Shortly thereafter, London’s Tate Gallery and New York’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum announced they would

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no longer accept Sackler funds. Several other museums are currently “evaluating” their relationship with the Sacklers, and more dominoes are bound to fall.

One of the ironic legacies of the early decades of the AIDS crisis is that we tend to think of public-health epidemics as impersonal and therefore even intractable—the result of sweeping, tectonic forces whose roots are tangled and difficult to understand. This can be true, but it’s also the case that many complex problems have their origins in actions taken by individuals. To a remarkable extent, America’s prescription-drug epidemic is the result of decisions made by a single family. Not just Purdue’s former leader, Richard Sackler, but also some of the women the original Sackler patriarchs married. According to emails obtained by the Massachusetts attorney general, as recently as May 6, 2017, shortly before I first approached her for comment on an investigative essay I was working on for *Esquire*, Dame Theresa Sackler, Mortimer’s widow, who lives in the UK and sits on the board of the Victoria and Albert Museum, wrote an email to Purdue’s staff asking what they were doing “to convince doctors and patients to keep using the drug” amid a cascade of negative reports about OxyContin. (In the wake of Goldin’s activism, Elizabeth A. Sackler, founder of an eponymous center for feminist art at the Brooklyn Museum, has come out publicly against Purdue Pharma. She and other descendants of Arthur M. Sackler, who died in 1987, before OxyContin was produced, have never owned shares of Purdue or benefited from their cousins’ opioid sales.)

Just as the prescription-drug epidemic is in part the fruit of the Sacklers’ labor, so the backlash against them is the product of a handful of people, Goldin chief among them. Her accomplishment shows that it often takes just one brave person who possesses stature within a community to disturb the balance of power. Notably, no equivalent figure has emerged in the academy. Among the legions of tenured faculty who continue to be enriched by Sackler grants and institutes and endowed chairs—most of them medical professors who purport to be healers—none so far has risen to carry this torch. At a time when even hedge funds are cutting ties with the Sacklers, the relative silence of the academy raises questions about whom faculty believe they’re getting paid to serve.

THE CHARMING, INTELLIGENT PEOPLE who work in development for museums and elite academic institutions have selected a tricky vocation. Suddenly, it seems, the communities they help fund, previously happy to accept whatever money was shoveled their way, are demanding they be more discerning about donors. In response to such demands, fundraisers often make two arguments: 1) Isn’t it better for a museum or university to keep tainted money than to return it so that families like the Sacklers can buy additional ski lodges? 2) If we stop taking money from the Sacklers, where do we draw the line?

Replying to the first objection, Goldin argues that the spoils looted from addicts would be better spent on treatment and harm reduction than on museum wings. The Sacklers’ recently announced donation to an addiction center in Oklahoma—part of a settlement with the state—suggests they’re slowly being forced to accept her view. Museums should also wonder whether they’re putting future fundraising at risk by keeping tainted money and thereby becoming identified in the public imagination as fronts for laundering reputations.

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As for drawing the line regarding donor virtue, the task is no doubt a difficult one. But are the Sacklers really a borderline case? If we segmented donors by the magnitude of their transgressions, who else would join the elite circle occupied by the owners of OxyContin? We may find it's a club far more exclusive than Mar-a-Lago.

Christopher Glazek is a writer living in New York. His 2017 investigation of the Sacklers for Esquire helped inspire Goldin's activism.

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