

FRIEZE

Why Are Museums So Plutocratic, and What Can We Do About It?

*Michelle Millar Fisher and Andrea Fraser discuss how to radically reshape
the power structures of museums today*

by Andrea Fraser and Michelle Millar Fisher (February 26, 2020)

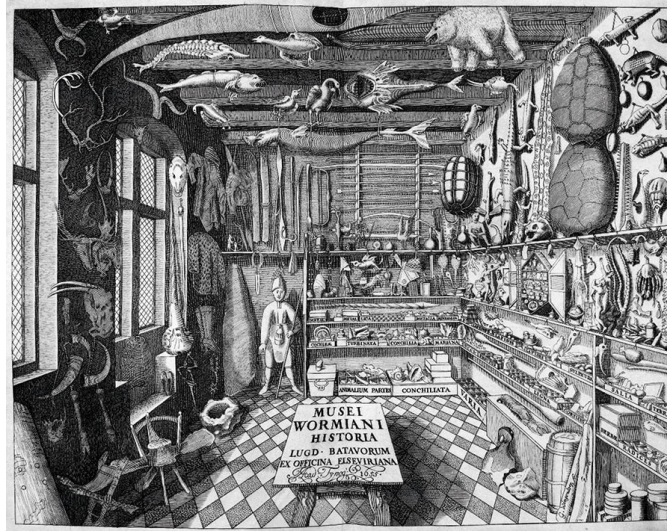


Night-time guerilla projection onto the Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2016, carried out by the Gulf Labor Coalition, Global Ultra Luxury Faction, Occupy Museums and The Illuminator. Courtesy: Global Ultra Luxury Faction and The Illuminator

Michelle Millar Fisher – a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and co-founder of the Art + Museum Transparency collective (which, in 2019, released a crowdsourced document detailing more than 3,000 art workers’ salaries across the world) – speaks to the artist Andrea Fraser, one of the leading figures of institutional critique, whose landmark study 2016 in Museums, Money and Politics (MIT Press, 2018) traced the political donations of board members at US institutions.

Michelle Millar Fisher What does the notion of public and private mean, on both sides of the Atlantic, when we think about museums? I grew up in the UK, so I have a very specific understanding of museums from that background. The broadest contrast is that, where I come from, there’s a lot more state funding for the arts and a stronger sense of museums being part of the fabric of a city or community – or even a country. There’s an understanding that that’s just where some taxpayers’ money goes. Whereas here, in the US, I think of Charles Willson Peale’s quote: ‘All the national museums in the world [...] were from beginnings of individuals.’ The focus is on the individual donor or on corporate philanthropy. I think the UK model is collapsing and becoming more aligned with the US approach but, growing up, that’s how I understood museums: as places that were completely free to go into, public in the truest sense.

Andrea Fraser My view of European museums has been shaped primarily in Germany, where there are many public institutions and very few private ones. But there are also many kunstvereins, or ‘art associations’, which correspond in some ways to nonprofit art organizations in the US. However, an essential difference is that the boards of kunstvereins are elected by the membership, while most US nonprofit boards are self-selecting. What is increasingly important to me is to consider not only an institution’s sources of funding but also its governance structures. Museums with self-selecting, self-perpetuating boards can be just as plutocratic with public funding as they are with private funding – if not, in some ways, more so.



Frontispiece of *Museum Wormianum*, 1655, which details Ole Worm's cabinet of curiosities. Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

In the US, historically, institutions often received substantial amounts of public funding. Starting in the late 19th century, many US museums were built on public land in cities contractually obligated to support them with public funds. Nevertheless, in most cases they were governed by wealthy individuals sitting on self-perpetuating boards in a structure that was modelled on private, for-profit corporations. That represented what the historian Peter Dobkin Hall called 'civil privatism' in his book *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector* (1992). It resulted in urban public spheres in which the most prominent 'public' institutions were fundamentally private and plutocratic in their governance structures. That, to me, is what is very specific about the US model: not so much that many museums were founded by individuals or that they depend on private funding, but that the system supports the non-democratic and often plutocratic governance of putatively 'public' institutions.



Protest calling for the resignation of Warren B. Kanders from the board of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2018. Courtesy: Getty Images; photograph: Erik McGregor/Pacific Press/ LightRocket

MMF I moved to the US when I was 22 to work in museums because I thought there was so much more opportunity here if you didn't come from a wealthy background. I was yet to fully understand how histories of race, and to an extent gender, foreclose opportunity in the US – something that 15 years of living here has subsequently taught me. In the UK, museums felt accessible in a way that they do not here, but, working in an institution in the UK seemed much less feasible. Actually, however, I see a similarity in that regard to the US – in that the governance structures of museums are held in the hands of very few. Museum careers are predominantly for a certain social class.

AF I do think that it's different in some of the older civic museums in the US, especially compared to more specialized and often more private modern and contemporary art museums. Some of them are free or you pay what you wish. But they also function through the publicization of privacy and the privatization of public resources, with the prominent recognition of patron support and often no recognition of public support, and with the administration of public funds and resources by private boards with no democratic input or oversight. Regardless of how much they receive directly from public sources, up to 30 percent of US museum revenues, or a percentage equal to the top tax rate, consists of indirect public subsidy in the form of lost tax revenues. That indirect public subsidy is never recognized.



Louise Lawler, production still, Andrea Fraser on the set of *The Public Life of Art: The Museum*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988. Courtesy: the artists

MMF The journalist Michael Massing mentioned that indirect public subsidy in a *New York Times* op-ed on 14 December 2019. It was one of the first times I'd seen any kind of mainstream news source refer to it. He wrote that MoMA (and, indeed, most other US museums) 'gets substantial public support through the tax write-offs its wealthy donors receive as well as its own non-profit status. The public is, in effect, subsidising the museum without getting any corresponding say in its governance.' His suggestion is that, in return for non-profit status, the government could require MoMA and other museums to allocate a certain portion of board positions to people whose lives are not devoted to making money.

AF Virtually every single room in most US museums is now named after a private donor. To the extent that these museums are public, what is being publicized is private wealth: wealthy individuals and their culture. I was invited to present my *2016 in Museums, Money and Politics* book at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., last year. It was among the first museums in which I spent a lot of time as a child, because my father lived near D.C., but I hadn't been there for a long time. It was really striking to me that in the National Gallery there are no named spaces. As you enter, there are a few big plaques with lists of patrons. But alongside the familiar names of the super wealthy, going back to Andrew W. Mellon, there are also many artists who gave their work to the museum. They're listed as donors and their names are recorded there in stone. It was very moving to see that.

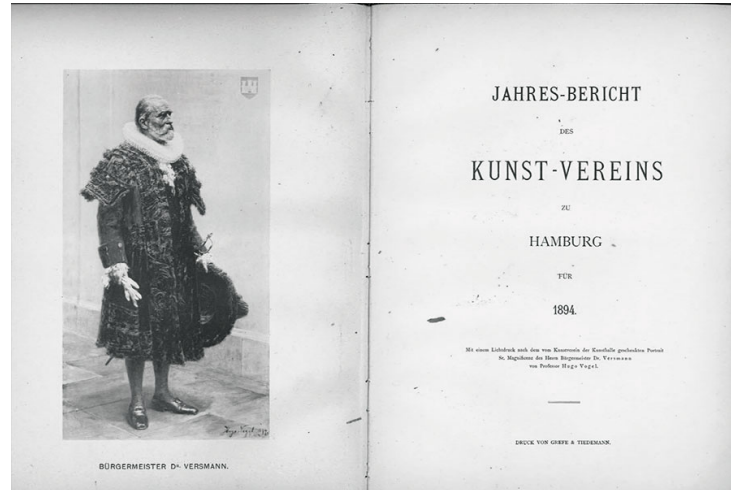


Beyoncé and Jay-Z, *Apehit*, 2018, video still. Courtesy: the artists and Iconoclast

MMF Do you think that 2019 has marked a specific tipping point in terms of the ways in which not just museums themselves, but also the public, have a greater awareness of some of the difficulties, tensions and challenges that are being raised by art workers and artists? Or do you see it as just another form of the same conversation that has peaked and troughed over the last 30 or 40 years?

AF I think it is different because of the new focus on governance. In the 1980s, the focus was on corporate sponsorship. In the 1990s, it was on the corporatization of public and non-profit organizations in terms of privatization, professionalization, the shift towards corporate populism and the embrace of spectacle culture: blockbusters, starchitects, merchandizing, et cetera. But I can't recall anyone – except, of course, Hans Haacke – really looking into governance structures.

However, I don't think we will get very far just focusing on the power, influence and wealth of the donor class. They function within a system from which artists and museum staff benefit. We also have to look at our own interests and participation in this system as what I call the donee class. Donors give and trustees serve because artists and museum staff beg them to do so. This has become the primary job of directors of institutions in the US. The rising costs of museums, which necessitate huge gifts from wealthy donors, are not primarily driven by board members. They are driven by the ambitious expansion plans of directors, the grand visions of starchitects and the skyrocketing prices of artists' work. This growth is driven by competition and ambition, not by need. It creates an extremely steep pyramid of resource distribution, in which a few individuals and institutions at the top absorb the vast majority of the total resources in the field. The corporate populist museum needs spectacle and the whole system flatters donors into funding it.



Annual report from the Kunstverein in Hamburg, 1894. Courtesy: © Kunstverein in Hamburg

MMF I find there's a tension between that area of the art-world economy and the rest of it – which is where I work as a design curator. I started off as a security officer; I've been an educator, and I've done a lot of other jobs in the museum that have not, in any way, connected me to donors. The work I commission or collect does not cost anything close to six figures, let alone seven. I see members of that donee class out begging, but most of my museum colleagues are either working front of house or in coat check; they're working in every corner of the museum, in places that don't closely connect them to those structures. They still, in many cases, have what might be called a naive, or really altruistic, understanding of the museum as a space of knowledge, of joy, of fundamental humanity. I had that. A part of me still does. But a part of me lost that after working at a really badly managed museum that simply didn't value its human resources.

In the last year especially, but certainly since the 2008 collapse of Lehman Brothers financial services, a lot of so-termed donees have pursued professional museum careers that have saddled them with huge amounts of debt and very few career possibilities. I think they feel those tensions in an embodied way because they want these spaces to be what they'd hoped they would be – but then they either haven't found jobs there or the jobs have been horrifically paid, often without benefits.

So, there is a donee class that absolutely engages with donors and participates in the upper echelons of the art market: art as an asset class, or as something that requires millions of dollars in fundraising. But most of the people I know in museums are not like that. They are the people who are trying to figure out what it means at a grassroots level to change that conversation entirely. I am interested in figuring out how we foreground, amplify and listen closely to art workers who are not curators, directors or well-known artists. They're the majority of art workers, and they're the thousands of people who have, in the last year, shared their salaries anonymously on the Art + Museum Salary Transparency spreadsheet, or attended weekly meetings to coax into life a union to implement better working conditions. But I think the dawning realization that I've had over the past 15 years of working in different museums is that I'm not sure they're spaces that can fundamentally be changed. And I don't know if they can be the spaces for the betterment of humanity I dreamed of at the start. But maybe I'm especially jaded right now!

My colleagues are more diverse than they were when I first started working at the Guggenheim in 2004; then, almost everybody working alongside me was an intern whose parents were paying their way for the summer. But now, as I hear voices from my colleagues who come from a greater diversity of places and experiences, I don't hear the questions they're asking the museum being satisfied in any comprehensive or long-term sense – whether they're questions about diversity of representation within collections, about pay transparency, about different types of governance structures for boards. Do you feel that there are different modes of governance which would offer paths forward for museum boards today?



Andrea Fraser, *Little Frank and His Carp*, 2001, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Galeria Nagel Draxler, Berlin/Cologne/Munich

AF First, I advocate for the elimination of personal financial contribution requirements for board members. Those requirements render museum boards de facto plutocratic. It's a 'pay to play' system in which positions of governance are basically bought. It would be considered corrupt in any other context. There's an argument that, especially in small organizations, the board members should make some kind of contribution. In that case, it should be a percentage of income. When you look at just how wealthy some board members are, even when contribution requirements are well into seven figures, it's a tiny fraction of their fortunes.

I also advocate that museums should have staff councils whose members are elected from and by the entire staff. Institutions dealing with the work of living artists should have artist councils, and museums should have community councils for other stakeholders. These councils should all have board representation. Together with eliminating personal financial contribution requirements, such councils would be a path to democratizing museum governance structures and diversifying their boards. And I think that all museum boards should have elected officials as *ex officio* members.

Ultimately, I believe boards should be elected by museum members. That was never the dominant model in US museums, but it was in many other non-profit organizations until fairly recently. With the public funding cuts of the 1980s, big private foundations pushed non-profits to professionalize and to replace the participatory model of many democratically structured organizations with a model that turned constituents into clients or customers. It destroyed what had been a training ground for active citizenship and participation in political processes. The challenge today is not to open boards to the non-rich, but to get people who are used to being clients, customers and contractors of organizations to step into governance roles. It's a lot of work. I don't think many artists see it as valuable, or see themselves as candidates for such roles.

I believe the protests over the Whitney Museum of American Art's vice chairman, Warren B. Kanders, would have unfolded very differently if the Whitney had staff and artists' councils with board seats. [Kanders owns a company that produces tear gas used on protestors internationally.] He finally resigned in July 2019 following months of protests. The Whitney had been trying – certainly more than the Guggenheim and the MoMA – to present itself as representing and responsive to a broad range of communities and constituencies. But, in that conflict, the museum's director revealed himself to be answerable only to one constituency: the board. But, of course he is! In the US, museum directors are hired by the board, they serve at the pleasure of the board, and they can be fired by the board at any time. As long as museum directors and senior staff have no job security, they have no real autonomy. Changing that would require something like tenure, which some university museums and galleries do have.



Tear gas canisters used at the US-Mexico border, 28 November 2018. Courtesy: Patrick Timmons

MMF Are there any other existing models that you know of: specifically with staff on the board, or staff able to make decisions or staff connected in some way to the governance of museums? How realistic is it? I can't see, for example, MoMA embracing this, because they simply don't need to in order to continue business as usual. But I can actually see smaller and mid-sized museums putting their money where their mouths are in terms of their mission statements around change, progression, inclusivity – whatever the buzzword might be.

AF The Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles is one US museum that is developing new models. It has an Artists Council with two members who also sit on the board – me and Charles Gaines. The Artists Council was instrumental in rewriting the museum’s mission statement a few years ago. I was adamant that it wasn’t going to be vague and basically useless, as most museum mission statements are. We helped draft what I think is one of the most radical in the US. It includes a commitment to ‘upending hierarchies of race, class, gender and culture’. That statement really does orient the board. All non-profit organizations in the US are defined as mission-driven, as opposed to profit-driven, but most have vague mission statements that provide zero guidance.

The biggest challenge for museums in adopting the kinds of changes I’m proposing is that board dues are basically the only reliable source of revenue that they have. To eliminate board dues requires a shift in the economic structure of museums, which would have to include not only finding alternative sources of revenue, but also dramatically reducing costs.



Andrea Fraser, *May I Help You?*, 1991/2017, performance in the exhibition by Louise Lawler 'WHY PICTURES NOW', Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy: Andrea Fraser

MMF I think the distinction between looking solely at funding and also looking at governance more broadly is now mirrored in what artists are doing – if you look at the activists involved in Decolonize This Place, the art workers engaged in unionization drives, the artists involved in W.A.G.E. who organize fair payment for artists and so on.

AF The big shift is that the non-profit art sector in the US has become industrialized and this has changed labour relations in the field. Artists are now more likely to see themselves as underpaid gig-economy contractors than heroically deprived autonomous producers; museum staff are more likely to see themselves as underpaid workers than contributors to a philanthropic cause. That also implies an acceptance of a non-democratic, hierarchical corporate structure. The idea of organizing to participate in governance is almost harder to imagine in that context. It’s a labour relation and we’re just organizing to get paid, right? But a lot of corporations in Germany, for example, have both very strong unions and staff councils and often these have significant representation on the boards. They’re not mutually exclusive.

MMF I can understand the feeling that we need unions before we can have staff councils. I think the reason artists, or indeed art workers of any kind, find it incomprehensible that they might be able to have a role on the board is that there's such a huge wealth disparity between them and the people on US museum boards today. And, indeed, between them as art workers and the senior curators and directors at museums. It seems like too radical a departure for them to imagine they'd ever have true agency in those spaces.

I want to close by asking about the viability of alternative approaches to structuring the contemporary art world. Nan Goldin's work with P.A.I.N. to campaign against arts institutions accepting money from the Sacklers – whose wealth has been linked to the production of the opioid OxyContin – was considered fringe a year ago. Now, it has very mainstream support and demonstrable outcomes from the group's actions. It struck me that your pretty radical and inspiring idea for rethinking museum boards seemed similarly impossible, but that this is a moment where the impossible can happen. What might the tipping point be?

AF I think we are already at a tipping point. The question is which way we'll tip. Democratic institutions of all kinds are being destroyed by corruption and plutocratic interests. Supposedly progressive cultural institutions have an opportunity to rebuild democracy, starting with their own organizational structures. Protest is an indispensable element of this, but transforming organizational governance can't just be about getting a few toxic trustees off boards, which implies that the system is okay without them. It has to be about demanding a seat at the table.