ART BECOMES ORTHODOX

Museums & culture groups are pressed to pledge allegiance to progressive doctrine

By Ashley May
Last fall a colleague came into my office with a story. She had spoken with the artistic director of an American symphony known for its interest in forgotten works and new music, its blending of past and present, its open door to up-and-coming composers. The musician had been asked by a supporter to select the next season’s repertoire with an emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion—with a larger number of slots reserved for pieces composed by women and persons of color.

The director replied that the symphony regularly performed works by non-white composers and women, but race and gender weren’t strong factors in artistic decisions. The symphony is in the excellence business, and creators from every background get a fair hearing. Ultimately each composition must stand on its own merits. The season’s repertoire would be transporting, challenging, and beautiful, the funder was told. The rest of the meeting didn’t go well.

My coworker encouraged the director to tell his story publicly, but he feared the risks were too high. There was a chance the symphony would be attacked. No artist wants to become an exhibit in somebody else’s ideological agenda. He could go on making music, showcasing new composers, and building his ensemble without the attention—or the grant money.

That all happened before this summer’s outpouring of racial, social, and political pain. Today, many arts organizations—museums in particular—are in high turmoil. Curators, directors, and board members are being pushed out. The leaders of many entities are under pressure to confess to supremacist thinking and amend their missions to explicitly advance a progressive agenda.

The demand that arts organizations take on social and political work is voiced with what one observer calls “blinding moral certainty.” How will donors, who hold a variety of views, respond? Is the purpose of art to propel social change? What about visions that don’t fit the cause du jour? What happens to artistic freedom in a woke organization? And who enforces the boundaries of this new orthodoxy?

It’s been building for years
Right from its creation by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the Whitney Museum in New York City has supported living American artists and new approaches. Its collection includes pieces by modernists like Alexander Calder, Edward Hopper, Jasper Johns, and many more recent creators. The Whitney Biennial

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show, which began in 1932, is the *summa* event in contemporary art.

Since Warren Kanders joined the board of the Whitney in 2006, he and his wife Allison have given generously to support the institution. Allison led fundraising efforts for the painting and sculpture department. The Kanders have also served on boards at other arts, education, and health charities, like the Aspen Art Museum and the Aspen Music Festival. While the couple have periodically given to election candidates, their political involvement is not obviously right or left, or large in scale.

The trouble began in 2018. Hyperallergic, an online media outlet funded by the Ford, Emily Hall Tremaine, and Nathan Cummings foundations to offer “radical perspectives on art and society,” reported that one of the companies run by Warren Kanders manufactures police and military gear, including teargas. That’s public information, but Hyperallergic then drew big red arrows from a heated political event—the use of teargas at the southern border of the U.S.—to a manufacturer (Kanders), and then to an art museum (the Whitney). The complaint was that the Whitney gains from immigration clashes and the militarization of law enforcement.

In quick turn, a group of staffers working at the Whitney wrote to the board calling for Kanders’ resignation. “We read the Hyperallergic article and felt not annoyed, not intellectually upset—we felt sick to our stomachs, we shed tears, we felt unsafe.” Museum director Adam Weinberg replied that “we each have our critical and complementary roles: trustees do not hire staff, select exhibitions, organize programs or make acquisitions, and staff does not appoint or remove board members.” He called for “mutual respect, fairness, tolerance and freedom of expression…a commitment to kindness. It is so easy to tear down but so much more difficult to build and sustain.” Kanders himself lamented that “while my company and the museum have distinct missions, both are important contributors to our society. This is why I believe that the politicization of every aspect of public life, including commercial organizations and cultural institutions, is not productive or healthy.”

In the following days, an intensive effort to oust Kanders was organized by a group called Decolonize This Place, which claims to “bring together many strands of analysis and traditions of resistance: Indigenous insurgence, black liberation, free Palestine, free Puerto Rico, the struggles of workers and debtors, de-gentrification, migrant justice, dismantling patriarchy, and more.” The activists declared war on what they called “art washing—using toxic philanthropy to legitimize culture.” On their website, they demanded “the abolition of prisons and police, bosses and borders” and regretted the existence “of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage.” What did they desire instead? “The founding of a new society.”

Over a period of eight months, a series of protests were staged at the museum and elsewhere. They climaxed in a march from the Whitney to Kanders’ home, where protestors chanted, “Warren Kanders, you can’t hide.” In July 2019, Kanders resigned from the Whitney board. He penned a mournful letter.

Art, as I know it, is not intended to force one-sided answers, or to suppress independent thinking. And yet, these recent events have illustrated how a single narrative, created and sustained by a group with a much larger and more insidious agenda, can overwhelm that spirit. The vibrant art community that this institution has been able to support since the days of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney is clearly at risk….the politicized and oftentimes toxic environment in which we find ourselves across all spheres of public discourse, including the art community, puts the work of this Board in great jeopardy.

Protestors celebrated the departure of Kanders, then upped the ante.
members are resigning. Literary and musical organizations have been attacked for political impurity.

For example, Gary Garrels, the top painting and sculpture curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, resigned after reactions to a Zoom staff meeting where he spoke about new initiatives to collect pieces by minority artists. (Last year he led the museum in selling a painting by Mark Rothko so the money could be used to acquire art created by people of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ artists.) In the course of the meeting he said, “Don’t worry, we will definitely still continue to collect white artists.” That was the end of his career. A petition fumed, “Just how long have his toxic white supremacist beliefs regarding race and equity directed his position curating the content of the museum?”

Other institutions received “open letters” from former museum employees, some current employees, interns, outside critics, and anonymous writers calling for systemic change. An open letter to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, for instance, argued that, “As the origin of the Western museum is inextricably linked with the colonial exploitation of Black, Indigenous, People of Color,” the museum needs to acknowledge the “oppressive systems” it operates in, and accept “a moral imperative to engage in reparations” and “become a community-wide advocate for dismantling white supremacy.”

A letter springing from “arts and cultural workers” in Boston is similar: “As a living relic of empire, the museum as we know it today exists because of its dependency on and complicity in the workings of settler colonialism and racial capitalism.” The letter demands that all museums in the city dissolve their hierarchical boards, acknowledge that they are located on land stolen from Native Americans, divest of all money connected to defense or oil businesses, and hire large numbers of minority staff. “This is not a call to reform historically white and white-dominant museums,” the workers write, “this is a call to unmake them.”

An anonymous “Anti-Racist Imperative” aimed at the National Gallery of Art in Washington called it “the last plantation on the National Mall.” It too argued that “racial capitalism” saturates the gallery’s trove of paintings and sculpture. The petitioners’ solution: “Dismantle the NGA.”

An “Open Letter to New York City’s Cultural Institutions” from “current and former black and brown employees” and their allies charges supporters of the Metropolitan Museum, Guggenheim, Museum of Modern Art, Metropolitan Opera, and other institutions with “covert and overt white supremacy” leading to “consistent exploitation” and “egregious acts of white violence toward Black/Brown employees.” Along with the call to make anti-racism a centerpiece of their work from now on, this petition calls on the museums and music groups to “define the police by ending all contracts you have with the NYPD.”

Comparable petitions circulated at the New Orleans Museum of Art, Palm Springs Art Museum, Jewish Museum in New York, Akron Art Museum, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and other places. Some former staffers at the National Museum of African Art complained to the Smithsonian that “systemic racism only grew” while that facility was led by a black curator from 2018 to 2020. Racial controversies led the Museums of Contemporary Art in both Cleveland and Detroit to dump their directors this summer. The Broad Museum in Los Angeles has long been picketed by social activists incensed by the fact that Eli and Edythe Broad have donated to charter schools in addition to other public schools. One Los Angeles theater worker created a Google spreadsheet titled “Theaters Not Speaking Out,” and circulated it to shame acting companies whose reactions to the George Floyd killing were deemed insufficient.

These pressures come not only from outsiders and the disaffected fringes of former employees but also from the very center of arts organizations. The former director of the Queens Museum, who stepped down after fights with her board over Israel, undocumented immigrants, and other political topics, argues energetically in a forthcoming book that “cultural institutions can’t be neutral in an age of protest.” The international association for museums has recently been embroiled in efforts to change its official definition of museums—aiming to redesignate them as sites for promoting equality, justice, and the planet’s well-being.

There is a major campaign to remake natural-history museums to focus on themes like climate change, eco-justice, genocide, and colonialism. The Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture in Seattle was recently reconfigured along those lines in a $99 million reconstruction. In Baltimore, the Museum of Art pledged that in 2020 it would only buy work produced by women artists and only mount shows made up of art by women.

That there are heavy doses of orthodoxy and orchestration behind these critiques can be seen in the many common themes in the open letters. One repeated thread is the sentiment that museums must in the future take direct action to “confront the status quo.” The letter to the Palm Springs Art Museum, for instance, instructs its leaders that neutrality is unacceptable. “Solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement is now the standard.”

The New York Times summarized today’s tide-change in the way museums approach their work: “For decades, cultural institutions have generally opted out of politically heated debates, positioning themselves as neutral territory and preferring to let the artists they present do the opining. As civic institutions often supported by taxpayer dollars, they have historically eschewed political allegiances. But this time is different. In the period of protests, many arts organizations have entered the fray.” Art historian Brian Allen makes the same point in National Review. The forces driving change in culture institutions today “envision the museum as a combatant in a civil war and a social, economic and political revolution.” They want museums on the barricade.”
Issues for donors

The convulsions this summer raise many questions for donors. Whether you give to your local art museum or sit on the board of a symphony, your chances of getting swept up in public conflict over your personal demographic, economic, or political background, or the mission or makeup of your institution, are suddenly much higher. As many arts supporters have recently discovered, even being an active progressive will offer no protection. The litmus test is whether you’ll demand that arts groups take positions, with real teeth, out on the far cultural left.

Who should even be “allowed” to serve on boards of trustees is an open arts battle today. What counts as unacceptable baggage? That will often be decided by the political culture of the community you’re situated in.

The longstanding traditions that board members should de facto be major donors to the institution, and people with varied ideological beliefs, philosophies, and backgrounds, have become controversial. A 950-page book by Andrea Fraser, detailing the political donations of those who serve on art boards across the nation, argues that it doesn’t matter whether the donor gave to Democrats or Republicans. Having monied “plutocrats” of any sort on boards is discrediting, according to the book, published by MIT Press.

There are now proposals that government entities should regulate the board composition of arts groups and other charities. “In return for nonprofit status, the government could require MoMA and other museums to allocate a certain portion of board spots to people whose lives are not devoted to making money,” suggested a long article in *New York Times Magazine*. Some of this summer’s open letters said that any institution sitting on public land or accepting public funds should have its leadership regulated in this way.

Free speech is another issue increasingly looming before leaders of arts institutions. In June, the chief curator of European painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Keith Christiansen, made an Instagram post on his personal account that featured an image of French archaeologist Alexandre Lenoir trying to preserve historic monuments during the French Revolution. Christiansen lamented “how many great works of art have been lost to the desire to rid ourselves of a past we don’t approve.” In response to other staff members who called this emblematic of “systemic racism at our institution,” Met director Max Hollein characterized the post as “not only not appropriate and misguided in its judgment but simply wrong.”

Who gets to decide the boundaries of free expression is an age-old question, but the art world has long promoted the idea that individuals should not be constrained from exploring and conveying personal visions. That is now up for debate if the visions don’t match progressive orthodoxy. Not only individuals but also institutions are feeling the heat. The Kanders situation at the Whitney and the Christiansen episode at the Met brought at least as much censure on the museums as on the individuals involved. Donors to cultural organizations will need to decide what free expression means, and what they will do to protect it when it is tested.

Is dissonance allowed?

In writing this story I was unable to find a single donor—of any perspective—willing to be quoted on these subjects. Even the arts have become landmines for donors. The days when you could join your local museum board with general applause seem far away. Instead of exploring beauty and truth, arts discussions now often center around political events, ideological controversies, and censure.

While the volume is especially high right now, these arguments are not new. Decades ago, William F. Buckley wrote that “the largest cultural menace in America is the conformity of the intellectual cliques which, in education as well as the arts, are out to impose upon the nation their modish fads and fallacies, and have nearly succeeded in doing so.” He urged cultural leaders to take “the side of excellence (rather than ‘newness’), and of honest intellectual combat (rather than conformity).” Buckley demonstrated personally that this could be done without life becoming a grim struggle.

One of Buckley’s chief combatants also navigated culture wars without invective and bitterness. Saul Alinsky, the predecessor to many of today’s community activists, was opposite Buckley in almost every sense, yet he agreed with him that active, respectful argument in a democracy is admirable. He writes in *Rules for Radicals* that “conflict is the essential core of a free and open society. If one were to project the democratic way of life in the form of a musical score, its major theme would be the harmony of dissonance.”

When artists and patrons strike dissonant notes in the future, what will the result be?