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This year in museums

by Daniel Grant

It is not news that the United States—and, perhaps, much of the rest of the world—has become an angrier place, filled with protests and expressions of contempt. So it probably does not come as a surprise that museums around the country and elsewhere have been the site of exhibitions, lectures, and impromptu demonstrations against the very institutions that reveal the level of current and overall discontent.

Staff members of the Whitney Museum of American Art, including several curators, recently drafted a letter protesting the ownership by the museum board's vice-chair Warren B. Kanders of the company Safariland, a maker of the tear gas used on the U.S.–Mexico border.

In April, several members of the coalition "Decolonize This Place" occupied the atrium of the Brooklyn Museum to demand the removal of the museum board's president, the former real estate developer David Berliner, and the hiring of a more racially and ethnically diverse staff in the wake of a white curator joining the staff of the institution's African art collection.

In July, the artist Nan Goldin and a group of activists led a protest in the atrium of the building that houses the Harvard art museums (the Fogg Museum, the Busch-Reisinger Museum, and the Arthur M. Sackler Museum), criticizing their financial ties to the Sackler family, which owns Purdue Pharma, the maker of OxyContin, the drug that has been blamed for fueling the opioid crisis in the United States and elsewhere.

Momentum for these art-world expressions of discontent has been building.

This past spring, the performance artist Andrea Fraser, whose work often seeks to make "institutional critique," published a book called *2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics* (mit Press) that documents the reported political contributions made by members of the boards of 128 museums and other arts organizations in the United States during the 2016 election. Adding context to all this criticism of wealth, privilege, and political muscle were work stoppages and demonstrations at both the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan and its

contemporary art branch, PS1, by union members protesting low wages and negotiations that had been dragged out by management.

Momentum for these art-world expressions of discontent has been building. In 2017, protests by African-American activists erupted at the Whitney Museum of American Art after it displayed Dana Schutz's 2016 painting *Open Casket*, which referenced the 1955 murder of Emmett Till. Protesters also appeared at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis after it installed in its sculpture garden Sam Durant's installation *Scaffold*, which became the subject of protests from Native American groups who claimed that his work made light of the largest mass execution in U.S. history, in which thirty-eight Dakota Indians were hanged in nearby Mankato, Minnesota, in 1862. In both instances, protesters claimed that their history was being appropriated, co-opted, and trivialized for profit, if not for fun, by white artists.

These various controversies raised questions that have yet to be fully answered. Is history proprietary to one group? Are artists to be restricted to pursuing subjects within the confines of their racial, religious, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds? Does the removal or destruction of a controversial work of art solve anything? Does a work of art actually make any difference in the world, for better or worse, or is its role more contemplative?

Life at the major art museums abroad this year has been no less fraught, with climate protesters staging a "die-in" at the Louvre in Paris (to condemn its acceptance of financial support from the oil giant Total), as well as demonstrations at both the British Museum and Tate Modern (to criticize sponsorship by the oil company BP) and the National Gallery (to protest their sponsorship by Shell). After a devastating fire at the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro this summer, which destroyed the building and most of the institution's permanent collection, artists and others protested the lack of preparedness and funding on the part of the government that made this a "foretold tragedy," in the words of one critic.

Museums have sought to get ahead of this discontent by staging exhibitions and talks that look at visual manifestations of protest. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston offered a month-long series of talks this fall about propaganda. The High Museum of Art in Atlanta displayed sculptural installations and screened a documentary about Tommie Smith's raised-fist gesture during the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. And the University of Virginia's Fralin Museum of Art offered a visual guide to twentieth-century protests by artists.

But these programs don't always work out as planned. In September, an exhibition at the University Art Museum at Cal State Long Beach that focused on police violence against African Americans morphed into a protest by artists against the museum's recent firing of its director, Kimberli Meyer. And in August, "Hope to Nope: Graphics and Politics 2008–18," a show of protest art at the Design Museum in London, turned into a protest by artists against the institution for renting out its atrium to Leonardo, one of the world's largest aerospace and defense companies, the previous month.

It is difficult to find someone who isn't upset about something. Perhaps you get upset by the fact that massive museums with 90-plus percent of their permanent collections out of sight in storage somewhere are constantly acquiring more stuff. (Some examples of that, for better or worse, below.) Museums do seek more and more, not with the idea of cornering the market but in order to be able to display the best, the more representative, and the most researched examples of specific categories of objects, be they artworks or something else.

Museums have tried to get ahead of some of protests, in large part by stepping up their acquisitions of works by African-American and women artists. Here's how.

The civil rights activist and art collector Peggy Cooper Cafritz donated her collection of 650 works of contemporary art by artists of African descent to The Studio Museum in Harlem and the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington, D.C. Most of the artworks went to The Studio Museum, including pieces by Nina Chanel Abney, Derrick Adams, Sanford Biggers, Nick Cave, Noah Davis, and Kerry James Marshall, among others. This comes just in time for a planned expansion of the museum.

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In a similar spirit, the collector and scholar Gordon W. Bailey donated thirty-two paintings, sculptures, and mixed-media pieces by such contemporary artists of African descent as Sam Doyle, Georgia Speller, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, and Purvis Young to the California African American Museum in Los Angeles.

While collecting pieces by African-American artists has long been a principal concern for The Studio Museum, it is a more recent priority on the part of other institutions, which have sought to make up for lost time. The music producer Jimmy Iovine donated a painting by Mark Bradford, *150 Portrait Tone* (2017), to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia purchased a 2017 outdoor sculpture, *All Power to All People*, by Hank Willis Thomas. Perhaps the most notable efforts of this sort was the sale by the Baltimore Museum of Art of works from its permanent collection by Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Franz Kline partly in order to acquire works by African-American artists. So far, the museum has used the money to buy paintings by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Amy Sherald, and Jack Whitten, a sculpture by Wangechi Mutu, and film pieces by Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelly.

For its part, the Getty Research Institute acquired the archive of artist Betye Saar as part of its newly announced establishment of the African American Art History Initiative. Among the other

artists represented are Adrian Piper, Kara Walker, Ed Bereal, Benjamin Patterson, Melvin Edwards, Lorna Simpson, Harry Drinkwater, and Mark Bradford.

Also of note is the accession of the photographic archive of Stephen Shames, best known as the Black Panther Party's photographer between 1967 and 1973, by the Briscoe Center at the University of Texas at Austin; the purchase of twelve works by the painter Beauford Delaney by the Knoxville Museum of Art in Tennessee; and the combination gift/purchase of thirty-four artworks by African-American artists from the Atlanta-based Souls Grown Deep Foundation by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond. Among these are drawings, paintings, and sculptures by Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, Ronald Lockett, Jimmy Lee Sudduth, Mose Toliver, Jesse Aaron, James "Son Ford" Thomas, and Purvis Young. The acquisition also features a significant selection of quilts by the women of Gee's Bend, Alabama, including four generations of Pettways and two generations of Bendolphs, as well as works by Ruth Kennedy, Nell Hall Williams, and Nettie Young.

Museums also have sought to rectify deficits in their collections and the holding of exhibitions of the work of women artists. The Smithsonian American Art Museum received a gift from the Kallir family of ten paintings by Anna Mary Robertson "Grandma" Moses that will move to the museum over the course of seven years. The first three pieces in this gift are *Out for Christmas Trees* and *Grandma Moses Goes to the Big City* (both 1946), currently on view at the museum, and the 1958 *Turkeys*. All ten paintings will figure in a traveling Grandma Moses exhibition slated for fall 2023, for which Jane Kallir is a consultant. Also in Washington, D.C., the National Museum of Women in the Arts has received two abstract paintings by the African-American artist Mildred Thompson (1939–2003) from her *Magnetic Fields* series, one contributed by Georgia Committee of the museum and the other by Camille Ann Brewer.

Many major art museums have acquisitions committees filled with people who join to learn about important artists on the curators' radars and who are expected to pony up when those curators make the case for purchasing a work by this or that artist.

The Brooklyn Museum similarly has, over the past two years, added to its collection of artwork by women almost one hundred works as part of its "A Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism at the Brooklyn Museum" campaign, including pieces by Emma Mos, Betye Saar, Betty Tompkins, Eleanor Antin, Nancy Azara, Andrea Bowers, Judy Chicago, Mary Beth Edelson, Lauren Ewing, Nona Faustine, Harmony Hammond, Deborah Kass, An-My Lê, Nikki S. Lee, Marilyn Minter, Park McArthur, Diane Neumaier, Miriam Schapiro, Joan Semmel, Sylvia Sleigh, Joan Snyder, Nancy Spero, Jana Sterbak, May Stevens, Athena Tacha, Adejoke Tugbiyele, June Wayne, and Martha Wilson.

Many major art museums have acquisitions committees filled with people who join to learn about important artists on the curators' radars and who are expected to pony up when those curators make the case for purchasing a work by this or that artist. This past spring, the acquisitions committee of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art contributed the approximately $2.6 million that the curators sought to purchase works by six women artists, including Martha Boto, Betye Saar, Jennifer Bartlett, Julie Mehretu, and Ruth Asawa. At the April event honoring the acquisitions committee, Michael Govan, the museum's director, said, "The curators at lacma have been talking about pushing the importance of women artists forward in acquisitions and exhibitions, making sure they are not just back burner but front and center."

Among the other museums that have continued to acquire the work of women artists are the Cleveland Museum of Art, which purchased Emma Amos's 1973 painting *Sandy and Her Husband*; the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, which bought a group of thirty-seven photographs by the Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide; the San Jose Museum of Art, which received as a donation five works (including the ninety-two-inch tall "Cascades-Perpendiculars II" from 1980–82) by the sculptor Louise Nevelson from the collection of Beverly and Peter Lipman of Portola Valley and the Lipman Family Foundation; and the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas, which bought directly from the Alice Neel estate the artist's 1943 painting *Julie and the Doll.*

The J. Paul Getty Museum has also added Camille Claudel's 1887 bronze *Torso of a Crouching Woman*, which was the first work the then-twenty-three-year-old artist produced in the studio of Auguste Rodin, whom she first knew as a teacher and later as a lover. The work is thirty-five inches high. Slowly, the Getty has been building its holdings of artwork by women artists, and already has acquired work by such sculptors as Luisa Roldàn, called La Roldana, Barbara Hepworth, and Elisabeth Frink.

These movements within institutions do not directly address the concerns of protesters. But if these disgruntled responses to long-recognized progressive institutions like the Whitney and the Brooklyn Museum are any indication, a return to "art for art's sake" is unlikely, either from disgruntled patrons or the museums they frequent, any time soon.

Daniel Grant is the author of *The Business of Being an Artist* (Skyhorse Publishing) and several other books.