

Corporate Sponsorship and the Capitalist Underpinnings of the American Art Museum

Introduction

Corporate sponsorship has become an integral element of the contemporary American art museum. In this paper, I will analyze how this came to be, the way that corporate sponsorship functions, and what this means for the art museum's place and significance within American society. First, I will outline the development of the art museum as an institution, leading up to the present day. Then, I will give an overview of the museum funding process. The bulk of my argument will be focused on how corporate sponsorship affects the museum visitor. I will provide an overview of this, then back up my statements with a case study. Finally, I will go into an analysis of the field of American Studies as it relates to my topic and describe how my own research adds to this field.

Before I go into my analysis, I would like to briefly explain my motivations for pursuing this subject. I am very interested in art museums and the ways in which they both reflect and influence the societies in which they operate. I am interested in many aspects of museology; however, art museums as a whole are far too broad a topic for a research project. Thus, I decided to narrow my focus toward the interplay between art museums and contemporary capitalism. This may seem like an unusual combination, as art museums are nonprofit entities. However, I believe that their complicity in capitalism is very significant, as art museums are expensive to maintain and must deal with capital constantly.

Anyone who has visited an art museum in a large American city has surely noticed its unmistakably corporate aura. I have identified three significant aspects of this corporatism: the

sponsorship of exhibitions and even entire museum wings by corporations; the display of commercial and commercially inspired art objects; and the museum's own quasi-corporate branding and marketing. I find this corporatism extremely interesting, as I believe that while it somewhat compromises the integrity of the art museum as a public institution, it is necessary to its continued survival within a capitalistic society, and has actually brought about a fascinating discourse wherein contemporary artists react to the corporate interests that influence their art production in unexpected ways. I believe that late capitalism has brought about a seismic change in what is considered "high art" in the 21st century, and that this change is reflected within museums today.

A Brief History of the Public Art Museum

I will begin my analysis of contemporary American society in a perhaps unexpected, though ultimately unsurprising, place: 18th-century France. This is the birthplace of the world's first, and still most famous, public art museum: The Louvre. As much as it is now a cliché, its founding was a revolutionary act. The collection of the French royal family was seized and placed into one of their palaces for all to see, an act which reflects a fundamental shift in the way that people understood art.

The so-called fine art tradition stems directly from the European aristocracy. In previous centuries, it was rather rare for art to be valued primarily for its aesthetic qualities. Its primary function was to represent power, either religious or political. Thus, the more powerful an entity, the more art they possessed. The shift in understanding of art's purpose coincided roughly with the European shift toward a humanistic worldview, in which the individual and its inherent

capacity for spiritual, moral, and intellectual growth was prized. Thus, when this worldview encouraged the people of France to revolt against their monarchy, art became one of the former markers of nobility, along with literacy, leisure, and open space, that was gradually made accessible to the majority of the population and became a marker of a “good” life. The art museum, along with other civic institutions, became a symbol of the new, democratic government’s goodwill toward its people. This notion carried over to the United States and is still widely accepted in both Europe and the US.

However, is the art museum truly as democratic as it is said to be? The museum is still a rarified space. Studies have continuously shown that young, low-income, and minority populations are not attending museums at the same rates as older, wealthy, and white populations – although this gap is slowly closing (2). Sometimes, high admission costs are a deterrent, but less tangible factors also make people feel excluded – the suspicion that they are not welcome, not represented, that the museum is not meant for people like them. Perhaps a bit of that old aristocratic attitude is still endemic to the art world. I would argue that museums’ willingness to work with corporations – the “aristocrats” of our societies – suggests this to be true.

Funding

Around the world today, art museums are among the civic institutions, including public libraries, public parks, and public schools, believed to be hallmarks of a society’s democratic foundation and commitment to the public good. This is certainly true of the United States, where nearly every metropolitan area is host to at least one comprehensive art museum. These

museums are considered to be an integral part of the city's public landscape, and as such, face great pressure to contribute to the city's wellbeing.

There is a certain idealized vision of the city art museum to which these museums tend to aspire: one in which the collection reflects the diversity of artistic production through space and time, and in which the visitors reflect the diversity of the city's population as a whole. However, a number of factors inhibit the ability of art museums to realize this ideal. Perhaps the most significant is that improving a museum's collection and visitor outreach requires a great amount of capital. In the United States, private entities such as corporations control the majority of capital, while public institutions are poorly funded at every level of government. Due to this lack of public funding, museums must rely on several private sector-based sources of income in order to survive and thrive.

In 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2018, the Association of Art Museums Directors (AAMD) compiled a report called "Art Museums by the Numbers", which includes numerous statistics about the operations of their constituents in the previous year (1). I will reproduce the 2018 report's statistics on average sources of revenue and support, as they provide a data-based representation of how art museums received funding in 2017 (one can assume that not much has changed in the most recent few years).

- Endowments: 22%
- Federal government: 6%
- State governments: 2%
- County governments: 3%
- City governments: 4%
- Other governments: .5%
- Colleges and universities: 3%
- Individual and family memberships: 6%
- Corporate memberships: 1%
- Individual and family contributions: 10%
- Corporate contributions: 4%
- Foundations and trusts: 8%

Benefit events: 4%
Admissions: 7%
Educational events: 1%
Exhibition fees: 1%
Restaurants and catering: 3%
Facility rentals: 1%
Museum stores: 8%
Other: 6%

As evidenced by these statistics, only 15.5% of American art museums' funding came from any level of government. This reflects the outsize influence of the private sector on American art museums. As the data shows, the largest source of funding by far is endowments. This refers to private museums which were founded by a single individual or corporation and are continuously funded by an endowment through the founder. In return, they generally must comply with the founder's wishes as to what is displayed and how the institution is operated. Public museums may have a bit more freedom but must rely more heavily on a combination of the other sources of funding mentioned in the data. Ultimately, both types of museums are quite beholden to commercial interests.

The Commercialization of the Museum Experience

Now, I would like to look at how visitor experience is influenced by these commercialization processes. The museum visit is traditionally understood to be a private, meditative journey, an individual's reflection upon works of transcendent beauty. In reality, the museum visit can be social, goal-oriented, and even competitive. Visiting a museum is often as much about being seen as it is about seeing. The museum's need to sell itself turns the visitor into a consumer, whether or not they actually spend money on the experience (and they usually

do, as the majority of American art museums charge admission fees). Below, I will briefly discuss a few of the ways that museums turn the visitor into a consumer.

The most obvious and established way the museum “sells” itself is through the gift shop. The gift shop makes the intangible tangible by reproducing works in the collection for people to take home. They allow the visitor to emulate, in a limited way, the aristocrats of the past with their private collections. While some may feel disdain at those visitors who seem more interested in the gift shop than the gallery, I would argue that it is quite a natural, human reaction. As enjoyable as it can be to view art from a distance, we greatly prize possession, and sometimes it is difficult to form a connection to a piece of art this way. By bringing a reproduction into one’s everyday life, the possibility of attachment increases.

Along with the ubiquitous gift shop, many museums also have a café, cafeteria, or restaurant. Food becomes another tangible commodity for visitors, and also encourages them to spend more time at the museum. Libraries and bookstores have also taken advantage of the sway that food services have on their clientele. In a way, offering this service completes the museum’s status as a public space by catering to the basic needs of the people who patronize it.

Museums make extensive use of advertising for temporary exhibitions. When in a large city, these advertisements often appear alongside those for clothing, movies, and concerts. This reflects the fact that in certain circles, seeing a popular new exhibition can be just as much of a status symbol as wearing a trendy article of clothing. As a result of high demand, museums can raise the price of entry for such exhibitions to arguably exorbitant levels, which further increases the perceived value of the commodity in the eyes of the consumer. In my experience, temporary exhibitions have a distinctly different atmosphere to the permanent collection. They sometimes tend to resemble private clubs, with long lines and strict entry controls, and attract a more status-

conscious audience than the collection. This is intensified when general admission to the museum is free, but the exhibition is not.

Social media culture has also transformed the museum experience. In a society where it sometimes seems like if an experience is not documented, it did not happen, museum visits are not exempt. Museums, with their varied displays and often impressive architecture, are highly compatible with the visually focused nature of social media. I have noticed many young people wearing fashion-forward outfits in museums, presumably to create social media posts that combine the aesthetics of their clothing with those of the space.

A Case Study in Conspicuous Consumption: Uniqlo and MoMA



Visitors waiting in line for Free Friday Nights (5).

The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City is one of the most well-known art museums in the United States. MoMA charges for admission, but since 2013, they have offered free admission on Friday nights (5). This is made possible through a partnership with Japanese clothing brand Uniqlo. Modern art museums such as MoMA tend to attract a younger, more diverse audience than other types of art museums. Interestingly, this is reflected in the

museum's choice of corporate partner. Uniqlo is marketed toward a young demographic. Their products are relatively affordable, yet well-made, and have a minimalist design. In other words, they seem likely to appeal to a similar demographic as MoMA.

Overall, this partnership is mutually beneficial and has no significant drawbacks. Waiving admission fees enables MoMA to attract a more diverse visitor base, while Uniqlo receives publicity for its brand. (Each visitor receives a free Uniqlo-brand tote bag, which expands this publicity beyond the threshold of the museum). Unlike in many endowments, Uniqlo does not make any demands on MoMA as to what may be displayed, other than requiring them to display their logo on materials that night.

MoMA is rather unique in that it receives no government funding, instead earning its (significant) budget through other means (3). They are more receptive than most museums to embracing corporate collaborations, which is not out of line with their image as a globalized, (post)modern public space. In a way, this partnership is refreshingly open about what it is – in many cases, corporate sponsorship is a more covert affair. Yet it also lays bare some of the more concerning aspects of the contemporary museum. While many Free Friday Nights visitors would undoubtedly like to appreciate the art closely, one gets the sense that the “hype” surrounding the event may make this difficult. In addition, visitors who may be opposed to Uniqlo's business practices – which include allegations of labor rights violations – may feel conflicted about participating in this event (6). If they cannot afford to pay MoMA's standard admission fee, they are effectively barred from the museum.

When I think of the postmodern museum, it looks like this: a place where art and commerce, the handcrafted and the manufactured, blend into one, sleekly packaged whole. In addition to subsidizing Free Friday Nights, Uniqlo creates apparel inspired by artists in MoMA's

collection, "...creating new audiences for art", according to MoMA's website (4). This may well be true, but it also raises a host of questions about ownership and authenticity that are beyond the scope of this paper. It is undeniable that commercialization of the art world has enabled many more people to discover art in recent decades, but at what cost?

An American Studies Understanding of Museum Operations

The purpose of American Studies is to think deeply about how American culture operates, and the implications these operations have. American Studies transcends disciplines and looks for the connections between seemingly disparate things. Much of American Studies research and practice is publicly oriented and aims to offer considered alternatives to a hegemonic way of "doing things". I hope to be a part of this tradition. In my research, my goal was to look beyond the "stuff" of the American art museum – in other words, the works of art with which the museum is usually conflated – to what actually has to go on in order for the collection to reach the American public. Art is often described as "transcendental", a pure and noble expression of the human spirit that is entirely separate from the mundane workings of society. In reality, this has never and will never be true. Art has always been deeply intertwined with money, power, and status.

In this paper, I engaged with an institution that is deeply entrenched in American society by arguing that its meaning changes when we consider its position within, and complicity with, capitalism. I have attempted to integrate multiple disciplines, bringing aspects of economics (which is by no means my specialty) into a museum studies analysis. I did this, not because I am particularly passionate about such details, but because I felt that it was very important to my

argument to do so. In our society, worth is often measured in economic terms, and this is the reality museums must face as well. Their success is not measured by the number of transformative experiences visitors have (how could this be measured anyway?) but by numbers: of visitors, of revenue, of accessions, and so on. I felt it was only appropriate to work with these numbers, as they have such an impact on museums' existences.

Conclusion

Art museums are in a unique position. They are some of the most widely treasured public institutions, yet they struggle to gain enough financial support to survive. They are often on the cutting edge of introducing revolutionary concepts to the public, yet they also have a stuffy and conservative image. They are loved by both progressive young people and reactionary older people. It is not surprising that much of their existence is a balancing act. It is difficult to say that private sector involvement in their operations is either entirely good or bad. I would argue that the capitalist system is deeply flawed, and that this has negative consequences on every single facet of society. Within such a system, museums, as well as all other institutions that work for the public good, must do what they can to survive, which sometimes means sacrificing some of their principles. With all their flaws, the world is far better with them in it.

Works Cited

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