**Inside the art world**

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Crises often bring long-standing submerged conflicts into the open. For a long time, numerous academic commentators on the public art museum have noted that these institutions depend upon economic inequities. (I am one of these commentators.) Luxury and poverty are brought into proximity when precious artworks, which are protected by poorly paid guards, are interpreted by scholars and cataloged by curators, whose activity is supported by the trustees.

That the older museums, originally palaces for princes, now in modern democracies have become public spaces that anyone with the cost of admission can enter does not resolve this problem. Not when it’s clear that the presentation, protection, and maintenance of these art collections depends upon a great deal of poorly paid labor.

But of course, it’s one thing to know in a general way about a moral problem, and quite another to be faced with it in an immediate in-your-face way. And so one consequence of the general crisis initially brought on by covid within the museum world is the present response of museum workers to this issue. According to the news several Manhattan museums (the Guggenheim and Whitney) are facing disgruntled employees, while the unionized staff of the Philadelphia Museum has gone on strike. And here in Pittsburgh the opening of the major Carnegie Museum exhibition, the 58th International, has been met by protests from museum employees who are members the United Steel Workers Union. As yet these Pittsburg workers lack a contract. In 2021 the lowest hourly wage was raised from $9 to $10, and just now to $12. But obviously, a salary of less than $25,000/year is not a living wage. Especially if this figure does not include medical benefits or retirement contributions. In fact, many of these museum employees are. part-time workers and more than 60 per cent make less than $15 per hour.

Usually, when I review the Carnegie Internationals in Pittsburgh, which I have done for forty years, I focus on the art. Some years ago, however, I reflected on the politics of this institution in an academic way:

When you enter Carnegie, you come into a luxurious space, open to every member of the public paying the admission fee. I enjoy this experience, but I am aware that the building is a palace. And if I, a relatively privileged, former tenured professor, see it this way, imagine how such a museum looks to poor outsiders.

These issues are familiar elsewhere. Once when the Whitney Museum was still on Madison Avenue, Manhattan I reported that its well-known survey exhibition, the Whitney Biennial, was devoted to an attack on consumerism, a strange presentation to see in an upscale shopping district. Often, I grant, there is a certain unreality between the political claims of contemporary art museum shows and the immediate practice of those institutions. But this year in Pittsburgh, at the opening of the 58th International, this situation has come home to haunt the museum.

Of course, the economic problems posed by extreme inequalities run throughout society. But what’s special about public museums is that at least on some occasions like the Gala opening of Carnegie International bring together the privileged trustees and collectors and their employees. Long ago Andrew Carnegie asked: “What is the proper mode of administering wealth after the laws upon which civilization is founded have thrown it into the hands of the few?” Carnegie’s answer to this question appealed to his version of Herbert Spencer’s social Darwinism. The duty of the wealthy was to organize “benefactions from which the masses of their fellows will derive lasting advantage ....” Nowadays that paternalism is no longer morally acceptable. And so drastic change is needed.

In a very different context, Rainer Maria Rilke famously wrote that an archaic torso of Apollo says, ‘you must change your life’. What the present situation in Manhattan, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh demonstrates is that art museums need to find ways to finance themselves in ways that do justice to morality.

Excerpted: ‘What Happens when Culture is too Expensive?’ Courtesy: Counterpunch.org