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**MUSEUMS, FINANCE CAPITAL,
AND THE CLASH OF CULTURE
WORKERS AND
COLLECTOR-TRUSTEES**

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Bubbles in the Boardroom

In the 21st century, museums have opened in numbers unmatched by the preceding 200 years, and not by popular demand.¹ The expansions and satellites proceeded even as visitors declined.² Behind this growth rests a crisis of overaccumulation. Capital, lacking profitable outlets in the realm of commodity production, seeks returns from asset speculation: Stocks, real-estate, and blue-chip art.³ Inflation of these assets is not a given; it must be driven, and museums help maintain and bloat prices in all three categories. They directly channel billions to the financial sector, grease the gears of gentrification, and backstop art as stores of wealth. Rather than visitors, then, demand for museums comes from speculating segments of the ruling-class.

In the United States, museums are governed and primarily funded by a coalition of finance capital and property. 40 percent of major museum board members or trustees represent the financial sector, with the closely-interrelated field of real-estate accounting for the next largest group (followed by oil and gas).⁴ They are vested with power over executives and expansions, and even at times over accessions and exhibitions. Their fortunes, to be clear about the source of value, are surplus appropriated from labor as profit, interest and rent through the circuits of global capitalism, and then hoarded in assets. The only qualification for museum trusteeship, to administrators and fellow trustees alike, is wealth and a predilection for buying art. With this, trustees harness the considerable powers accorded public charities to their material benefit.

The modern American private foundation—the grant-making vehicle often used by corporations and wealthy individuals to fund art and other charitable organizations—originates in the previous turn-of-the-century Gilded Age.⁵ Industrialists and railroad monopolists, enriched by labor repression and the genocidal expansion of western markets, promoted philanthropy as a bulwark against communism.⁶ During the Cold War, art and literary institutions partnered with US intelligence to exercise soft power toward the same ends.⁷ The

explosion of “charitable giving” in recent decades (a steady, inflation-adjusted increase from less than \$150 billion in 1976 to nearly \$400 billion in 2016⁸) partly charts growth of the nonprofit-industrial complex, a combination of state, capital, and activists mobilized against proletarian self-organization.

From some angles, museums remain the instruments of counterinsurgency envisioned by robber barons and cold warriors. During the George Floyd Uprising, the Oakland Museum of California solicited plywood protest art from business and property owners who’d boarded their windows, authorizing the rebellion’s targets as its storytellers.⁹ But, in the US, the relatively limited role of institutional art collections in legitimizing state power and projecting national identity diminished under neoliberalism. As prices for contemporary artists soared in the 1980s, crass marketization overtook the pretensions to public representation characteristic of Fordist-era museums.¹⁰ Today, through tax policies regulating nonprofits and art, museums provide a public subsidy for the private accumulation strategies of their collector-trustees.

In other words, collector-trustees do not underwrite museums out of generosity. Philanthropy is commercial secrecy. In exchange for donations, collector-trustees receive definite services and material benefits. Activists have lately observed how association with museums enhances donors’ social standing, but this is just one enticement. In this first installment of a three-part article, I start to categorize trustees’ stakes in managing the flows of value in and out of museums. I outline three aspects—the plaque, the rebate, and the pump—so as to trace the oppressions refracted in the circulation of artwork. My goal with the three-part article is to contribute towards a program of solidarity and struggle for museum unionists and anti-capitalist artists and cultural workers.

The plaque

The best-known service museums offer donors is a plaque. It comes in sizes: small, like a thank-you note in the wall text, or a large engraving over the doorway. “Naming rights,” the top-shelf

option, implies donors could call a gallery anything they'd like, but they usually name them for themselves. The plaque is meant to denote a wealthy, civic-minded sophisticate. It reinforces the assertion, sputtered against the prospect of expropriation, that art extends only from generous plutocrats: "Without wealth," wrote Andrew Carnegie, the violently anti-labor industrialist reputed today as a philanthropy thought-leader, "there can be no Maecenas."¹¹

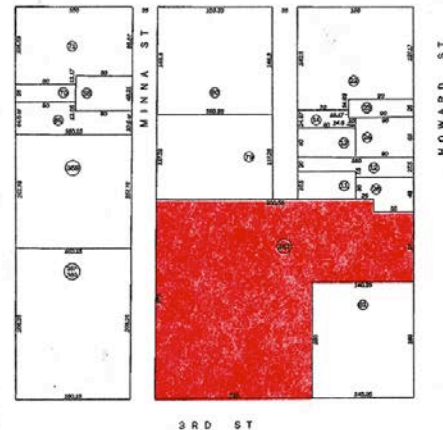
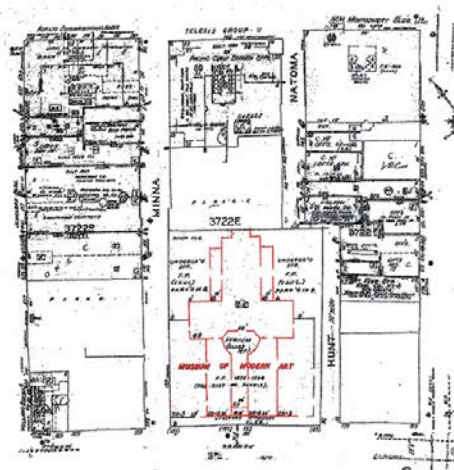
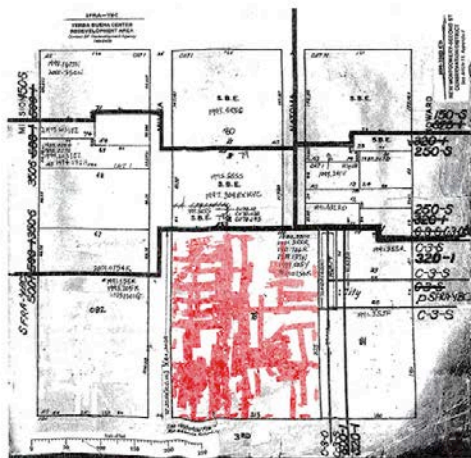
Today, though, reputation laundering has limits. Take the Sacklers: The Purdue Pharma dynasty, funders of institutions including the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, turned to these art institutions for "short positive statements," coordinating directly with museum staff, as activists highlighted their role in the

opioid crisis, only to see their names stripped from the donor walls.¹² Leon Black, the billionaire co-founder of private-equity firm Apollo Global Management, and Warren Kanders, chief executive of military and police equipment manufacturer Safariland, resigned from their respective positions at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art under pressure not only from artists and activists but out of deference to fellow trustees.¹³ In every case, other donors endorsed jettisoning the spotlight donors when they began to undermine the social elevation museum trusteeship confers.

Campaigns against "toxic donors," like the Vietnam War-era institutional critique of the Guerrilla Art Action Group, or Hans Haacke, who exposed connections between the New York art establishment and US imperialism, treat the plaque as a strategic lever. By pressuring profiteers of militarism and addiction in their philanthropic guise, as with Kanders and the Sacklers, activists can amplify public pressure through the art press and disturb their targets within elite social circles. Yet the focus on "toxic" donors also risks the political mistake of affirming trustees' structural position by implying some harmless wealthy person deserves to be glorified by the plaque. The risk, in other words, is of reifying instead of contesting institutional hierarchy.

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Parcel museum, whiteout in red: South of Market, San Francisco.

The rebate

Only the wealthy minority of taxpayers who itemize deductions avail themselves of the charitable contribution deduction, which reduces income subject to taxation—and the wealthier the donor, the greater the advantage. In other words, the state treats identical

The risk of reifying instead of contesting institutional hierarchy.



donations differently based on the donor's income. For example, a low-income donor's \$1 contribution to a public charity costs \$1, whereas a wealthy donor's \$1 contribution effectively costs \$0.65.¹⁴

Museums are a lobby group for such regressive tax policy. In 2006, Museum of Modern Art director Glenn Lowry and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art director Neal Benezra pressured lawmakers to preserve one of the more perverse incentives of philanthropic arcana, fractional giving.¹⁵ In this now-limited scheme, one could donate successive shares of a single artwork, effectively milking the artwork's appreciation, without even relinquishing the artwork.¹⁶

Museum endowments, the focus of this article's second installment, "Hedge Funds With Art," also avoid taxation on investment returns with the use of offshore "blocker" corporations. What matters is less the dizzying loopholes and more that the foregone tax revenue subsidizes private accumulation. Reformers have periodically curtailed the tax-saving practices of museum donors (Congress largely disincentivized "fractional giving"), without seeming to disturb the underlying trend of art institutions' increasing fealty to self-interested collector-trustees.

The pump

Artwork enters the world as an embryonic commodity, fledges at the point of exchange, and absorbs value from the productive economy as it circulates. Museums are integral to this circulation, underpinning the arch-fetishism of the auction house. They establish and maintain the "symbolic value" realized as price.¹⁷ Auctioneers plainly cite curatorial authorities at museums to boost investor confidence. So do the major banks and specialized firms in the growing, \$24 billion market for art-secured lending.¹⁸ Collectors seize on high prices not only by buying and selling, but also tapping their appreciating assets for liquidity in evermore ways. Art collections rank behind real-estate and securities as the fourth most common collateral loan.¹⁹

Most art comes to museums as donations, not purchases. Trustees and donors exploit their position to confer institutional credibility on their investments, or gain competitive edge over other collectors.

They donate with the knowledge that even news of accessions affects prices, and acquire similarly-useful, privileged information about programming as well as access to curators, whom they enlist as more and less formal consultants.²⁰ By conditioning donations, they undermine the autonomy of curators who could limit their capacity for self-gain; and by conditionally *loaning* collections, as with the Fisher Collection at SFMOMA, their grip tightens.

With some \$58 billion in endowment funds, US museums are also significant sources of investment capital, fees, and returns for the financial sector.²¹ Major donors establish the principal funds of endowments, while investment income is the other primary source of museum revenue next to direct donations. Mapped within capital accumulation and circulation, endowments in particular index the racialized exploitation of labor and natural resources in the Global South. As I'll detail in the second installment, trustees influence institutional investments with little oversight, authorizing annual management fees to Wall Street contractors of as much as \$10 million—in some cases, to firms whose executives sit on the museum board. The self-dealing is institutionalized, and it threatens to transform museums into hedge-funds with art.

Under the direction of donors with nearby property interests, new museums encourage or stabilize luxury residential and tourist districts. The Broad, opened in 2015, followed developer and insurance financier Eli Broad's prior investments in downtown Los Angeles. The recently-launched Institute of Contemporary Art San Francisco expands the real-estate holdings of the Rappaport family in the deindustrializing Dogpatch neighborhood. Less obviously legible in the built environment is art institutions' contribution to finance-driven gentrification. Museums, like sovereign wealth funds and pensions, are significantly parking endowments in private-equity rental portfolios. In 2021, landlords enjoyed pandemic-era corporate welfare and double-digit rent increases in metropolitan areas. Although unsustainable not least to most of their workers, trustees are hitching museum endowment returns to the continued rise of urban housing costs.

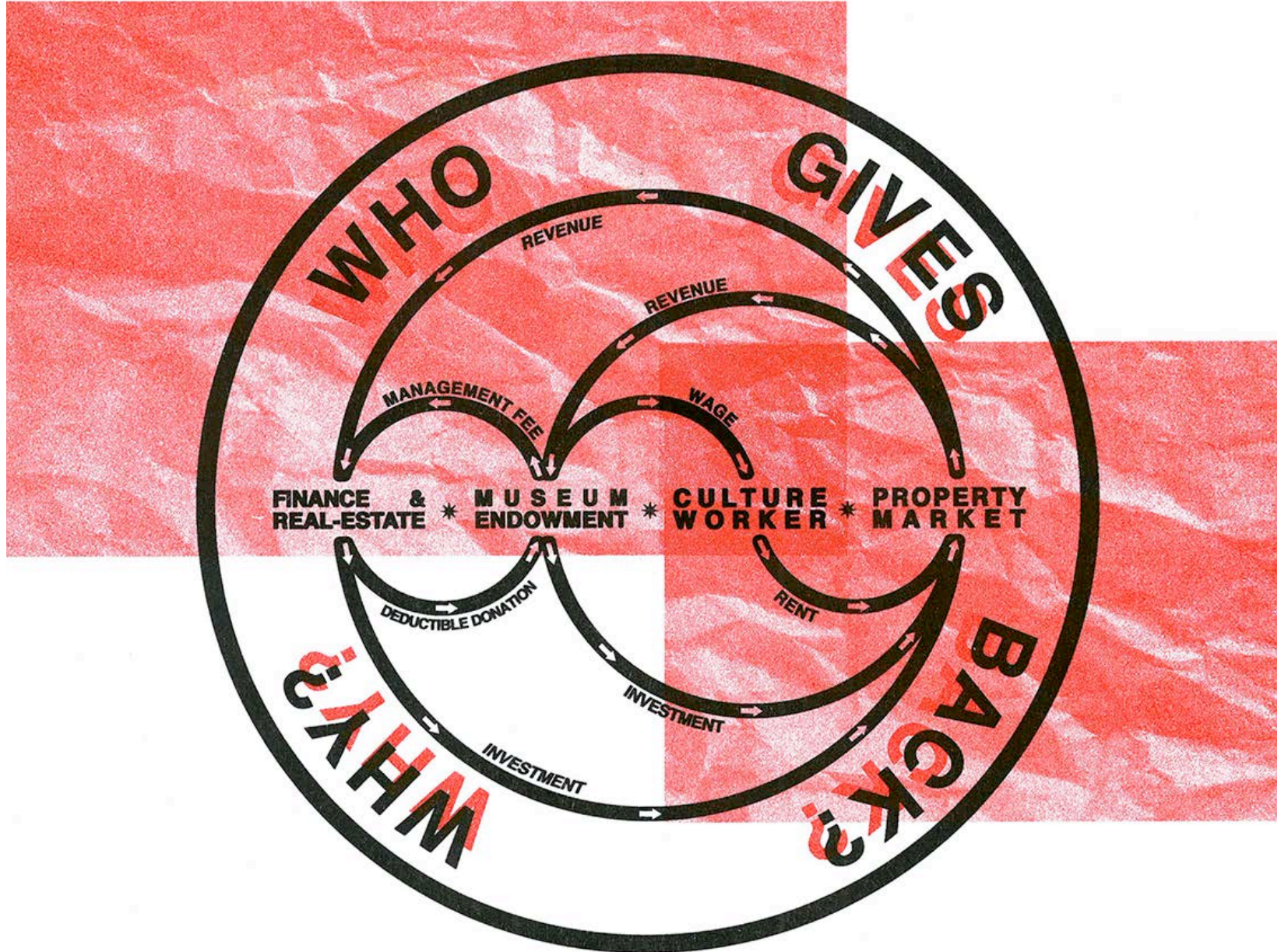
The cultural worker

Collector-trustees do not exercise their power unilaterally. It is mediated by directors and executives held in thrall to the board by lavish compensation and perks, like housing stipends or interest-free home loans;²² manager-administrators answerable to the c-suite; curators and programming staff with ambivalent allegiances; third-party contractors such as security guards; unpaid docents; and a plurality cohort of frontline, installation, and other entry-level workers. For the increasingly agitated ranks of cultural workers, the supposed prestige and access afforded by art institutions no longer compensates for sub-living wages and professional precarity.

Between 2018-2020, more than 1,000 workers at 14 museums nationwide formed union bargaining units.²³ Amid the George Floyd Uprising, ad-hoc organizing emerged from personal accounts of workplace racism. Layoffs and pay reductions during the pandemic, as well as anti-union measures taken by museum leadership, spurred more workers to action. Recent months have seen labor activity at institutions including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Jewish Museum.²⁴ Yet the wave of labor and pressure campaigns tends to crash on the rocks of the administration, or else rattle the moors of the boardroom and then vaporize. The third installment of this piece examines the politics of recent mobilizations.

The coalition character of museum boards illustrates the economic position of the cultural worker. At first, it appears contradictory: The landlord who takes most of their income sits above the administration suppressing their wage (and so limiting rent). Yet the financier, amongst the dominant coalition, resolves the problem by offering the cultural worker credit instead of raises. Given these conditions, the cultural worker's wage improves only with the board's dominance over tenants and debtors. Emerging from this predicament, though, are possibilities for coalitional counterforce: If the cultural worker's boss acts on his interests as a landlord, is he more vulnerable to tenant pressure? If collector-trustees broadly act on their interests as asset speculators, cultural workers' leverage rests in organizing across sectors and national borders.

This article doesn't conclude with proposals for ethical investments or ameliorative policies. The point is that museums' current growth model depends on expanding forms of exploitation beneficial to their ruling coalition. Whether looking to the organizational chart as something to invert or decapitate, or to unionizing or contract negotiations, cultural workers must continue developing capacity for analysis and collective action. To the current regime, museums' relationship to appreciating assets determines their fate, and the internal contradictions of capitalism spell massive devaluation. Even the chance to decide what's worth salvaging from the carapace of hoarded capital hangs in the balance of power between cultural workers and collector-trustees.



Hedge Funds With Art

US museums channel \$58 billion to financial markets through funds known as endowments. Deductible donations establish the principal of an endowment, which remains invested, and a fixed amount of the profits support operations. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's endowment has grown to \$3.2 billion, while the private foundation behind the Getty Museum invests \$9.2 billion. Over the

past decade, many institutions have raised their holdings in “alternative investments,” a category that includes private equity. And, in the same period, private equity firms have increasingly sought returns from real-estate.^{25 26} As a result, museums now back the development and acquisition of rental properties, playing bank to the enterprising landlord.

So, I suspected art institutions figured in the transformation of my own surroundings. Oakland, California added some 9,000 housing units between 2010–2020.²⁷ What few are “affordable” rest on public subsidies for private, nonprofit landlords whose tenants face harassment and high rates of eviction, especially during the pandemic. Rent has more than doubled citywide, and the number of renters earning \$150,000 quadrupled.²⁸ Black depopulation continued as market-rate housing production intensified displacement of the poor and working-class.²⁹ The bulk of the construction occurred downtown. Some developers systematically emptied single-room occupancy apartments to market them to affluent tech workers.³⁰ Other firms, with cash not least from the arts, erected luxury towers as homeless encampments grew in the shadows.

The city's tallest building is Atlas. Studios start around \$3,000/month. It opened in 2020 and, as of summer 2021, half of the 633 units were empty.³¹ Carmel Partners, the developer and owner, laid groundwork for the \$200 million build-to-rent project by retaining a local lobbyist, Greg McConnell, who has opposed development fees for affordable housing and property taxes for public education,^{32 33} and by installing an executive, Greg Pasqua-



Developers use museum endowment funds to build luxury towers above homeless encampments in Oakland.

li, on the board of the downtown business improvement district, which primarily manages security-janitorial workers tasked with criminalizing unhoused people.³⁴ In Los Angeles, a Carmel executive bribed former councilman José Huizar in exchange for reducing affordability on an Arts District development.³⁵

Several arts-related private foundations back Carmel, public records show. The foundation controlled by Mimi Haas, the Levi's heir, and a board member at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Modern Art, has disclosed investments with Carmel since 2014. In 2013, the J. Paul Getty Trust reported \$2.6 million in a Carmel fund. That same year, Getty also reported \$33 million in a fund managed by CIM Group, Oakland's largest commercial landlord, which recently flipped a former department store downtown currently leased as offices by Square. In other words, Carmel attacks Oakland public education and expands private policing in order to cultivate a favorable investment climate for California art philanthropies.

Although less directly related to museums, another Carmel Partners investor warrants attention. The Surdna Foundation has in recent years partnered with the City of Oakland on what they present as anti-displacement programs. Surdna, which reported \$5.4 million with Carmel in 2020, underwrites "Belonging in Oakland: A Just City Cultural Fund," which awarded eight local arts organizations \$780,000 in 2021, as a part of the national private foundation's "Radical Imagination for Racial Justice Initiative."³⁶ Overall, Surdna's grant-making activity in Oakland appears to be less than its investment with Carmel. More to the point, Surdna depends financially on the very drivers of displacement it claims to radically oppose.

Museums don't only figure in urban gentrification. Carlyle Group and Blackstone, two of the world's largest investment managers, have in recent years spent billions of dollars buying mobile-home parks.³⁷ Among the art institutions to disclose real-estate investments with these firms on tax documents from the past decade are the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Getty Trust. The residents may own their homes, but they generally rent

the lot. Few can afford to relocate the structures, and they're rarely subject to tenant protections. So the private-equity firms detected unrealized profits, for themselves and their investors, in the chance to hike rents in one of the country's largest stocks of affordable housing.

Nor is real-estate the only economic sector supported by museum endowments in a manner that directly benefits the art institutions' ruling coalition described in the first installment. Just as museum boards of land speculators route endowments to property markets, museums boards of energy executives route endowments to oil and gas production. Every institution I researched for this article reported fossil fuel investments within the past decade. The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, the Getty, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston have since 2018 reported holdings in EnCap Investments, which lists dozens of US oil producers in its portfolio, plus a hedge in Encino Environmental Services.

I gathered a picture of endowment investments at ten major US museums from tax returns and audits, largely the 990-T form.³⁸ There, nonprofits report investments structured as limited partnerships, a standard arrangement with private equity. (These investments often flow through tax-blocking offshore entities.) But reporting norms vary, with some museums obscuring an already-narrow window. The Getty, for example, since 2014 has abbreviated those funds listed on its tax returns, preventing us from observing the appreciation of its holdings in Carmel or CIM, while the Metropolitan Museum of Art simply combines profits from all partnerships on a single line. Most any level of official disclosure presents endowments in the abstract language of prices.

Museum workers, like anyone with nothing to sell but their labor, rely on the exploitative social relation of the wage for the means to reproduce themselves. Endowments add more dimensions to this fundamental antagonism. When wages rely on endowment returns, and endowment returns rely on rising rent, museum workers rely on their domination as tenants to survive. In other words, as a primary revenue source, endowments condition institutional growth on the stability of financial markets driving ecocide and housing costs.

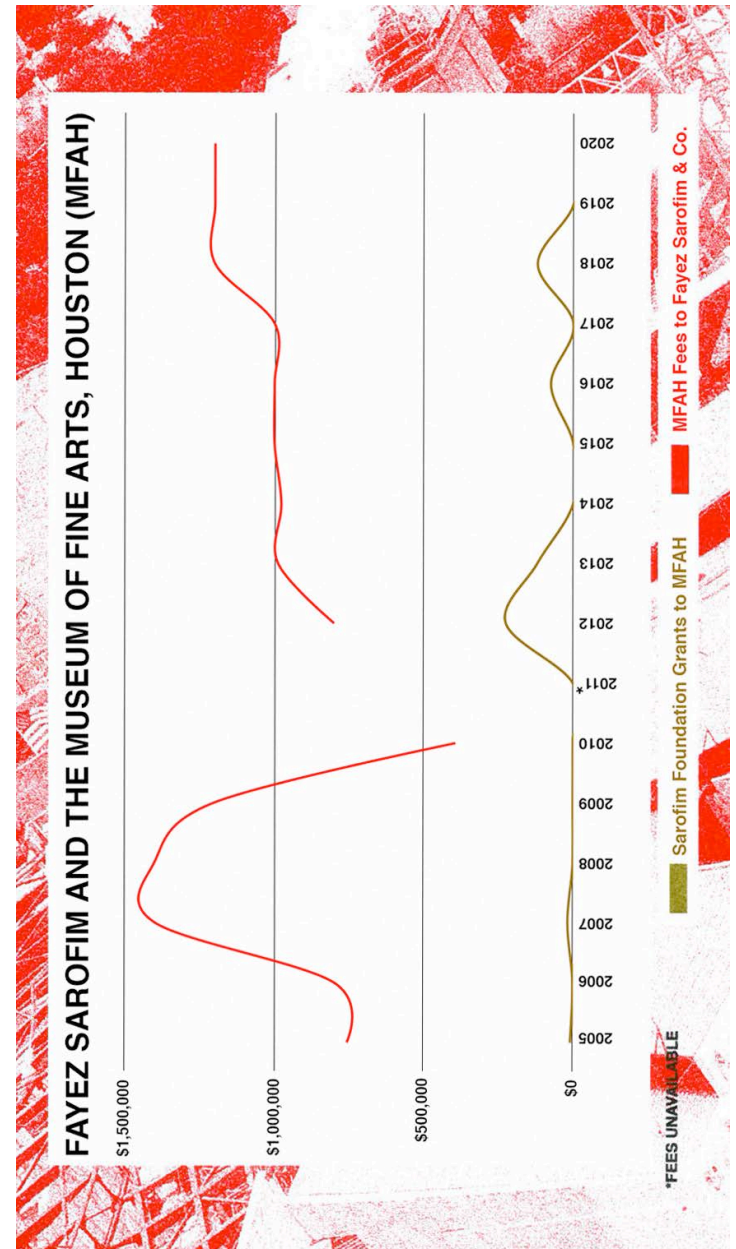
Before returning to the implications for arts organizing (the subject of the next installment, “The Balance of Power”), I want to continue describing the atmosphere of bourgeois relations among collector-trustees.

Institutionalized self-dealing

Collector-trustees routinely compare buying art and buying equities, drawing analogies in either direction to illustrate investment strategy. Occasionally, philanthropy is openly acknowledged as a cost of art investing: a \$15,000 donation to join the acquisitions committee at the Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art is a “very cheap buy-in for a credential for them to get access to work,” gallerist Esther Kim Varet said of collectors on a 2020 podcast.³⁹ Donations similarly open doors to endowments, providing valuable access for the financiers who solicit and invest funds for institutional investors. Through endowments, collector-trustees exercise their aggregate class power to stabilize financial markets. Indicating this dynamic is the prevalence of board members whose firms profit from investing endowment funds for institutions they govern.

At least five of the ten institutions I examined have paid management fees to investment firms run by board members in recent years, tax returns and audits show. From 2016–2019, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation invested \$7.4 million with a firm managed by two board members, paying \$168,768 in fees. From 2014–2017, The Metropolitan Museum of Art authorized \$7 million in management and performance fees to one firm run by a board member, Broadreach Capital Partners, and another, Whalerock Flagship Fund, run by a board member’s son. Since 2016, the Museum of Contemporary Art has paid at least \$1.9 million to former trustee Daniel Loeb’s Third Point Capital. In 2013, the Getty reported \$82.8 million with Blackstone, shortly before then-Blackstone manager John Studzinski joined the board.

The Internal Revenue Service requires nonprofits to disclose related-party transactions, such as payments to firms controlled by trustees, and prohibits certain forms of “self-dealing.” Yet there’s little



enforcement, and reporting is inconsistent. The Guggenheim fees, for example, aren't disclosed in the appropriate tax forms, only in standard audits by a contracted firm. With this as well as the general opacity of museum endowments, which disclose fewer details than the similarly-structured investment funds of public pensions and universities, the full extent of individual trustee self-interest in institutional finance remains murky. (In my experience, museum flacks won't even identify investment committee members.) What's clear, though, is collector-trustees like Faye Sarofim leverage board access as financiers and art buyers alike.

The 93-year-old Texas billionaire founded investment management firm Faye Sarofim & Co. in the late 1950s, and as the portfolio swelled, so grew his art collection. In 1999, Sarofim explained his tendency to buy and hold chunks of established companies, like Phillip Morris and Microsoft, as a way to avoid the remorse he felt after selling a canvas by Childe Hassam. "The value of the painting went up," he said. "My biggest mistake was selling."⁴⁰ Sarofim mixed business and luxury consumption such that the difference started to blur. He not only bought paintings by buzzy artists, in some cases he managed their personal wealth, too. A similar dynamic emerged at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and the Menil, where Sarofim or his family members are influential donors—and manage some of each institution's endowment.

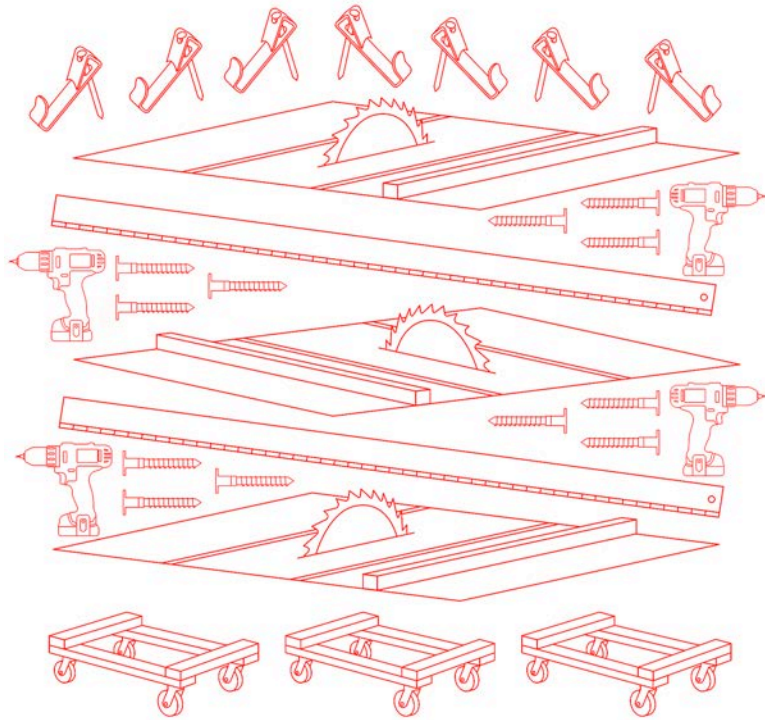
Between 2005–2020, Sarofim's private foundation contributed \$565,000 to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), where his daughter-in-law, Courtney, is a trustee. In the same period, the museum authorized \$8.7 million in fees to his firm for managing the \$1.3 billion endowment. In 2015, MFAH unveiled plans for a \$450 million expansion, the Faye S. Sarofim Campus, financed in part by \$70 million from Sarofim.⁴¹ The inaugural exhibition in the Sarofim Campus, which opened last year, marked the public debut of his collection: *Three Centuries of American Art: Antiquities, European and American Masterpieces from the Faye S. Sarofim Collection*.

In these transactions, the pump and the plaque described in the first installment proceed along parallel tracks. Sarofim's investment firm received millions more from MFAH than his foundation con-

tributed, a pattern predating his onetime donation by more than a decade. The MFAH board also figures in a web of business relationships between Sarofim and other Houston elites. His firm manages investments for three grant-making vehicles associated with oil heir and MFAH trustee Mary Cullen, plus foundations controlled by members of at least three other families who donate to the museum. His ex-wife, Louisa Stude, the mother of Christopher Sarofim, an executive at the family firm, is honorary chair at the Menil Foundation, which also contracts Faye Sarofim & Co.

Sarofim's \$70 million donation obviously entailed naming rights to the Sarofim Campus, and with the exhibition raised the prestige of his privately-held art collection. Christie's typified the media hype when it gushed that "the collection's timelessness and vastness render it a museum in itself," raising the question of how the museum exhibition and related scholarship would affect sales prices.⁴² There's certainly precedent for MFAH trustees loaning works to the museum for exhibition before turning to sell them at auction. Between 2015–2018, Christie's auctioned dozens of paintings from the collection of Roy and Mary Cullen. Five of the ten most valuable were shown at MFAH in the six years prior. The top three, all exhibited at MFAH, together fetched \$495,000.

Even so, Sarofim needn't sell his "masterpieces" to seize on the appreciation conferred by their lofty debut. With the financialization of art, Sarofim's collection is amenable to collateralization, portfolio diversification, and other means of liquidity. Even if he donates them to MFAH, as the museum director doubtlessly hopes, the tax deduction is based on the artworks' market value, not their cost basis. "This generally means a higher income tax deduction for the donor and more smiles in April," Morgan Stanley's wealth consultants say of the merits of donating art to museums. Or, maybe Sarofim expects his own death to continue raising the collection's esteem. As he said in a 1992 interview: "I always think that most investors' time horizons are too short."⁴³



The Balance of Power

“As long as one is on the move, one will not remain alone.” — Asger Jorn

The culture worker handles and interprets the collector-trustee’s premium assets for a pittance.

Even when grudging or critical, this labor favors the collector-trustee, because art institutions and discourse support the owners of art

and its means of production and circulation. No individual practice shifts a balance of power structured by private property. The commodity status of artwork is not overcome by formal conceits, only highlighted. Yet rejecting the institution has little more effect, because there is no outside. Museums are embedded in financial markets such that proletarians relate to them unwittingly through endowments more so than art; as the previous installment stressed, there are more tenants affected by museums’ speculative investments than there are museum-goers. Fittingly, then, the movement of culture workers today supplants illusory decisions between staying and going, participation and abstention, with questions of organizational form and collective strategy.

In recent years, culture workers have strode to develop a shared understanding of their position. They disclosed to each other their pay, observing the chasm between them and executives, and their experiences of workplace racism. They dispelled the dual myths that cultural prestige and nonprofit virtue compensate for sub-living wages. Mounting a wide-ranging critique of museums’ relations to gentrification, colonialism, incarceration, and other forms of oppression, they also politicized the resources expended to glorify donors. This self-inquiry has begun to cohere culture workers against the bosses—indicated most notably by widespread unionization—and to consider their proximity to wealth less as an opportunity for individual advancement, and more for adversarial action.

Red Bloom, a communist group in New York, surveyed art workers during the pandemic, amid devastating layoffs and the wake of the George Floyd Uprising. They reported higher expectations of fewer workers in unsafe conditions. They also reported dissatisfaction with management-led diversity initiatives, which increasingly appear to be the new face of union-busting. Invited to imagine the museum post-pandemic, their responses reflected a broad political horizon. They envisioned higher wages and the proliferation of museum unions, as well as greater public funding. They also voiced desire for social transformation beyond the arts, including an end to police and commodified education, healthcare, and housing. “They want to be less reliant on museums or even to abolish museums and

their boards completely,” reported Red Bloom. “They want freeports, art fairs, and commercial galleries to disappear.”⁴⁴

Workplace democracy? Or workplace abolition? Are these desires hopelessly contradictory, or positively incendiary in their friction? Do bread-and-butter demands inhibit the appetite for social transformation? Is there a pro-revolutionary dynamic between museum unionism and community organizing? What role is there for rank-and-file militants within the strictures of business unionism? And what’s art without its commercial arbiters?

The movement of artists and art workers in recent years raises these questions, and in the evident failure of its struggle against capitalism, as well as concessions yielded to its partial and particular demands, provides insights. In this final installment, I share observations and proposals for organizers in the arts, primarily addressed to culture workers contemplating the limits and possibilities of a militant museum unionism.

In the best case, upon publication, this piece becomes instant litter, trampled by the real movement retaking history in the streets.



In 1971, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) staff organized an independent, wall-to-wall union, the Professional and Administrative Staff Association (PASTA). The Art Workers Coalition (AWC), formed two years earlier, had highlighted MoMA board members’ stakes in US imperialism and raised demands to the institution, primarily regarding artist relations. While AWC presented artists as workers and MoMA as their employer, AWC’s demands said little

about MoMA’s actual wage-laborers. Nevertheless, the groups energized each other: AWC “provided momentum” for PASTA, and PASTA in turn focused AWC’s diminishing organizational capacity.⁴⁵ MoMA’s free days resulted from their agitation, and PASTA, representing nearly half of MoMA’s 400 employees, struck twice before affiliating in the mid-1970s with the United Auto Workers (UAW).

PASTA received splashy coverage in the art press.⁴⁶ In 1972, staff at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) also unionized. But it would take 45 years for the trend to resume. Now, since 2019, amid a general resurgence of socialist politics, especially among urban millennials, workers at ten art institutions have affiliated with UAW’s Local 2110 alone.⁴⁷ Their demands around wages, transparency, and decision-making power are similar to PASTA’s, as is the bitter resistance from administrators: captive-audience meetings and protracted contract negotiations, amid conciliatory messaging and targeted layoffs. These workers mounted antagonistic pickets and protests, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston staff undertook strike action.⁴⁸ Yet the highest-profile museum “strike” wasn’t authorized by a labor union at all.

Strike MoMA, organized by the International Imagination of Anti-National Anti-Imperialist Feelings (IIAAF), initially involved ten weeks of action in 2021. The collective includes Decolonize This Place, which previously joined with Whitney workers to oust tear-gas trustee Warren Kanders. At MoMA, IIAAF made no demands. It drew a line from MoMA’s founding Rockefeller dynasty to the current board of “death-dealing oligarchs,” foreclosing reform. In a collective text, IIAAF presents its “strike” as a simultaneous refusal of MoMA, which it wouldn’t dignify with demands, and prefiguration of a museum run by “workers, communities, and artists,” a museum “converted into a theater of operations where our entwined movements of decolonization, abolition, anti-capitalism, and anti-imperialism can find one another.”⁴⁹

IIAAF stated it “unconditional solidarity” with MoMA workers, writing that the “just transition to a post-MoMA future” would minimally “preserve and enhance the jobs of museum workers, and enact reparative measures for communities harmed by the museum over

time, beginning with the legacy of land dispossession.” The vision echoed an open letter signed by 150 artists and art workers around Strike MoMA. Spurred by links between Jeffrey Epstein and MoMA trustee Leon Black, the letter called for a “collective exit from art’s imbrication in toxic philanthropy and structures of oppression,” and for museums to “pursue alternative models, cooperative structures, Land Back initiatives, reparations, and additional ideas that constitute an abolitionist approach.”⁵⁰ So what was the relationship between Strike MoMA and MoMA workers?

MoMA’s union was not a part of the IIAAF, but supportive workers leaked internal information, and praised Strike MoMA in the press. One estimated that half of the workforce supported the actions, saying management was afraid of a mass walkout.⁵¹ Artist Gabrielle L’Hirondelle Hill withdrew work from an exhibition, and two staffers walked out in protest when demonstrators were blocked from the museum. But the administration sought to disorganize and isolate the protesters (several were permanently banned), and no internal revolt arose. The most conspicuous meeting of Strike MoMA and MoMA staff involved clashes with security. Public statements signal agreements between MoMA rank-and-file and Strike MoMA. What prevented their linkage is a major obstacle to developing militant museum unionism with wildcat action.

Underlying the rift, confirmed to me by MoMA workers supportive of the actions, may be differing relationships to the institution. Artists create commodities for sale on the art market, while art workers sell their labor power to employers for a wage. As the Art Workers’ Coalition concluded, “artists are not workers.”⁵² (Thereafter, it became the Artists’ Coalition.) Art production does not conform to the capitalist mode of production, as Dave Beech argues, but it is routinely organized as a capitalist enterprise, with oppressive and alienating wage relations.⁵³ Definitions of art or culture worker that smooth these differences risk proposing dubiously emancipatory coalitions of workers and their bosses. But that doesn’t mean “all talk of an ‘artists strike’ is farcical,” as Ben Davis writes.⁵⁴ The exploitation of aesthetic practice today is broadly akin to the dynamics between gig-workers and information technology firms, and the conditions

of work shape the form of strikes, boycotts, and sabotage. At institutions like MoMA, though, the most consequential withdrawal of labor or efficiency remains with the wage workers.



The balance of power between culture workers and collector-trustees presents an imbalance of information. Organized culture workers know what they make, and in “nonprofit” arts settings, executive compensation figures are generally available to the public. Yet the board is a black box; we see who comes and goes, not what they do inside, especially regarding endowments.

Almost universally, the new wave of museum unionists demand transparency. But it isn’t always clear to what end. I want to underline the demand for a few reasons. It can contest the commercial secrecy shielding collector-trustee self-interest in institutional finance, real-estate development, and programming and accessions. It can show the limits of narrowly organizing for wages and benefits, and it can also connect struggles in and out of the workplace.

I have emphasized in previous installments how endowment investments in property markets condition institutional growth on rising housing costs. Given this situation, culture workers win raises on the condition of their intensified domination as tenants. I’m partial to highlighting secretive endowment investments in property markets because it mobilizes objections to rent, and uncovers the institutional forces of gentrification. As I researched the previous installment, I was surprised to find distant art institutions literally invested in the mindless urbanization of my neighborhood in Oakland, and I felt galvanized as a member of an autonomous tenant union.

But this is only one example. Organizers with groups such as Strike MoMA and Prescription Addiction Intervention Now (PAIN) have targeted philanthropy to show donations as a share of the profits from imperialism, incarceration, ecocide, and pharma-capital. Museums, though, aren't only symptomatic of these forces, they're part of the cause. Endowments show how they marshal institutional resources behind the stability and continued profitability of the same projects. In this light, the culture worker's material interest in struggles over the wage is not only quantitative, but also qualitative. What's a raise if it's funded by inflation of shelter costs?

Labor law, while generally a muzzle on rank-and-file action, does include the right for unions to obtain information from employers. Exercising this right toward agitational and solidaristic ends outside of bargaining cycles is not standard business unionist practice. But cadre formations among museum union members, potentially with union staff, are in a position to appropriate the information request privilege. Doing so can help unite rank-and-file workers with community members against the coalition of finance capital and property currently governing museums, and show that the case against trustees goes hand-in-hand with the case against endowments.

On this front, there's some urgency. With the campaigns against trustees, and pressure on pension funds and public universities to divest from industries such as fossil fuels, investment managers and wealth advisors appear to be anticipating critical attention turning to the endowments of art institutions. Inaction around endowments cedes the ground to the bosses.

The Rockefeller Foundation coined the term "impact investing," and funds outfits, such as Upstart Co-Lab, pitching it to museum trustees as a way to avoid further scandals related to endowment investments in "opioids, weapons, and fossil fuels[.]" Showing the emptiness of this term, Upstart Co-Lab cites private equity firms Apollo Global Management, BlackRock, and Carlyle Group as authorities on impact investing.⁵⁵ Combating commercial secrecy means outstripping these nonprofit-industrial complex attempts to further mystify museum endowments.

If the transition to a "post-MoMA future" minimally requires

worker- and community-control of museums, plus reparative measures beginning with land dispossession, as the IIAAF proposes, it must also include seizing endowments and withdrawing them from financial markets entirely.



The endowment-seizing scenario implies the breach of myriad laws, and the retreat of collector-trustees from a critical position in the global economy. Even so, insofar as it implies workers' self-management of museums, questions arise over its emancipatory character. As left critics of historical socialism argue, workers are capable of managing their own subjugation.

What if the newly-empowered workers declined to reinterpret collections and democratize exhibitions? What if they declined to continue affirming art? And need they wait? This past March, two MoMA frontdesk workers were stabbed on the job. One was photographed bloody and smiling on a stretcher. The memetic form of this image carries a quotation suggesting joy at the possibility of sustaining life without work, without museums: "I'm going to get hazard pay!"

Museums maintain a hierarchy of aesthetic practice. But if the throne is reserved for "fine art," there's a lot of room; it's hard to imagine a prohibited form of cultural expression. What this indicates is the revenge of the demand for representation in museums: The category of fine art has widened apace with capitalism's appropriation of artistic virtues — flexibility, improvisation, collaboration, etc. — to justify the precarity, boundlessness, and wagelessness of work today. t

In this situation, the artist can't be said to model disalienated la-

bor after capitalism. The liberation of proletarian aesthetic energy is not the freedom to be an artist, it's the disintermediation of social production. Museums' hierarchy of aesthetic practice primarily subordinates this form of creativity: The emergence of communist life in an already-existing tendency towards revolt against the wage relation. Workers' self-management of museums is a vision of freeing art from the ruling-class, when what we need is to free ourselves from art.

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