

Laura Kraicovich

Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest

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In a brief but striking paper from 1967, dedicated to “other spaces”, Michel Foucault suggested an interpretation of the museum as a form of heterotopia. In contrast to utopias—i.e., spaces “with no real place” which “have a general relationship of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society”—, heterotopias can be defined as real places, according to Foucault, as effectively existing: “formed in the very foundation of society”, “something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (1986, 24). Among these forms, he highlights the museum space. Heterotopias are at once myths and factual disputes of ordinary spaces. *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest* by Laura Kraicovich moves like a tightrope walker on this thin line that she interrogates and analyses. In her dual role as a museum director and an activist, Kraicovich examines the current state of museums and provides a map, based on symptomatic cases, of how culture and museums have inevitably come under fire in an age of protest.

The cause. At the center of the debate is the museum (along with other public exhibition

spaces), but also its foundation, namely the preserved artifact, which has become both the object and subject of political contention, real as well as metaphorical, “with the specific intent of mobilizing its contents, uses and meanings” (Baldacci 2016). The author pieces together a complex puzzle that has led art museums, established initially as colonial institutions, to embody an ideology of neutrality and substantial support for capitalist values. She sheds light, through relevant case studies, on the origins of collections, curatorial processes, and the resulting plundering that determines how and whether the work is presented to the public. The cause is often the “opaque” role of the artistic director, who is subjected to power strategies. These may vary, but the former prevails in the tug-of-war between politics and knowledge. The author highlights two agents in this dynamic: (i) private or prestigious corporate funding for museums, and (ii) boards of directors composed of politicians and entrepreneurs. This has led, in most museums, to an exercise of what amounts to a kind of “cultural dictatorship”, decontextualizing objects from the social context to which they once belonged, with a resulting “neutralization of art” and, inevitably, of history (Bourdieu and Haacke 1995, 98). The “ways cultural spaces are funded”, Raicovich writes, are

"among the thorniest aspects of undoing unjust ideological frameworks embedded in museums, in part because the power relationships embedded in them—especially in the United States—mirrors the yawning gap in wealth and privilege between an increasingly exclusive minority and the vast majority of society" (93). Due to their dependence on philanthropy from individual donors, Raicovich argues, museums are more accurately understood as representing the cultural influence of neoliberal wealth than as institutions devoted to nurturing creative genius. Considering this, she invites us to consider the museum a public space where knowledge and collective awareness are produced. In Kraicovich's opinion, this implies keeping it alive as a place of contestation and care. All societies should balance the normalizing power of museums as cultural institutions by fostering the continuous questioning of memories and predefined classification systems. By doing so, the places and spaces of knowledge and memory (such as archives, museums, universities and the Internet) can be reconfigured as inclusive places that serve life in general. Achille Mbembe (2021) suggests that this has become one of the most urgent imperatives of our neoliberal, global, and anthropocentric present.

The effect. In response, the author refuses to let us accept the conventional idea of the museum as a "neutral" space. Raicovich also examines how museums manage crises and the different forms of protests that follow. The volume opens with Nan Goldin's Prescription Addiction Intervention Now (PAIN) against the use of funds from the Sackler family (whose profits, Goldin accuses, come from the production and sale of addictive opioids) in major international museums. This is followed by demands for the repatriation of looted artifacts and the removal of monuments. The author casts a spotlight on the Whitney Museum's inability to respond effectively to calls for the removal of Warren Kanders—a producer of tear gas—from its board of trustees.

Or, likewise, the removal of the painting *Open Casket* (2016) by Dana Schutz, depicting Emmett Till, from the 2017 Whitney Biennial, referencing the *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969, which excluded Black art and artists from a show about the Black community. Kraicovich uses the event to draw attention to the manifestations of white supremacy in cultural institutions, as well as how white curators continue to uphold exclusionary practices, consistently condescending, haughty, and *whitesplaining* in support of the dominant political mindset. For Raicovich, these interruptions of business-as-usual are openings to understand and reimagine how museums operate and for whom. This examination begins with an event in which the author herself is the protagonist. As the director of the Queens Museum, Laura Raicovich helped transform the New York municipal institution into a public place for art and activism, organizing impactful exhibitions that were also political protests. Then, in January 2018, she resigned after a dispute with the Queens Museum's board of trustees and city officials became a public controversy: she had opposed the use of the museum by the Israeli government for an event featuring Mike Pence, Vice President of the United States under President Donald Trump.

Cause and, thankfully, effect. *Culture Strike* is not a new story. As part of what Hans Haacke defines as the "sociopolitical value system" (1995), the production, circulation, reception, and conservation of works of art has been the focus of Institutional Critique over the past fifty years. In a text that serves both professionals and the curious, the author's task is to map the most recent "non-neutral" forms and to make the reader aware that, on the one hand, neither artists nor cultural institutions are immune and that, on the other, resistance is not a magic shield: everyone contributes—voluntarily or involuntarily—to the maintenance and development of the ideological framework

not only within the artistic environment but because the museum is a heterotopic space within a given society. So what can be done? By naming museums as the main sites where the cultural hegemony of power is enacted, and by staging practices and exhibition logics that remind us how “museums have less to do with the past than with the future”, we must keep in mind that “preservation is less about preserving the past than creating the future of public space, the future of art, and the future itself” (Steyerl 2017, n.p.).

Culture Strike: that is, seven necessary steps for creating an alternative space within which culture can thrive; a culture that relies less on oppression and exclusion to declare its excellence and more on care, generosity, and action. *Culture Strike*: a guide to creating spaces for contemplation and connection.

Perhaps, even for revolution.

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