

Notes on the Museum's Publicity

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According to the National Endowment for the Arts, in order for an institution to qualify as a museum in the United States it must, among other things, have "permanent facilities open to the public on a regularly scheduled basis" and be "a non-profit tax-exempt organization."ⁱ The non-profit tax-exempt status of an art museum, even and particularly its income-generating activities, such as merchandising, depends on the museum's primary charitable purpose of "providing educational experiences for the public." This educational purpose is conceived of as accomplished in the first instance, not in any actively educational programs or practices, but simply in the presentation of art to the public: not only "on a regularly scheduled basis" (like any commercial art gallery), but specifically by "a non-profit tax-exempt organization."ⁱⁱ

It would seem, then, that it is the museum's non-profit tax-exempt status that qualifies the art works it presents to be the object of the educational experiences on which its tax-exempt status depends. However, this apparent tautology can be resolved by introducing a single displacement; it is not tax-exempt status as such that conditions the educational value of the art objects presented in museums, but the philanthropic gestures through which those objects find their way into the private non-profit sphere.

So I arrive at the rather contradictory logic of the private non-profit art museum's status as a public institution. The economic aspect of the art museum's publicity is conditioned by the fact that it is publicly subsidized, often directly through municipal support and state and Federal grants, and always indirectly through its tax-exempt status and the deduction on income taxes allowed contributions to charitable organizations. (Under the Tax Reform Act of 1969 the tax-payer's share of every \$1000 donated to a tax-exempt organization was estimated at 60-70%.)

Yet this economic publicity is predicated on, and at the same time concealed by, the much more highly publicized privacy of the bankers and investors, lawyers and industrialists, executives and corporations, on whose philanthropic engagement non-profit organizations depends.

Public subsidy is allowed no such publicity. The charitable deduction is invisible; municipal support goes to the most menial, least visible

aspects of the museum's operations—utilities, building maintenance, and security. There are no plaques reading, "This light bulb was given to the museum by the City of New York."

The museum's purpose is not only to publicize art, but to publicize art as an emblem of bourgeois privacy. Its purpose, in a sense, is to publicize privacy. It is in this, it would seem, that the museum's educational function consists.

Of course, this has always been the logic of American public policy. Public provision, if it must exist to maintain stability in a population subject to the violent vacillations of a capitalist economy, should exist always only as a promise and never a right: a promise perpetually retreating into the private sector. The history of this retreat is marked by a trail of institutions and organizations operating in the name of public education. When art museums began to be established in numbers in the United States, in the last quarter of the 19th century, what limited public relief programs that existed were being systematically dismantled and privatized. Some of the proponents of privatization founded museums and libraries, others established Charity Organization Societies. Like museums, these Societies would offer only things of the mind and spirit. Instead of providing material relief, they sought to educate.

In what did this education consist? Not schooling, not training, but rather "friendly visits" that aimed "to regenerate character," and "involved the direct influence of kind and concerned, successful and cultured, middle- and upper-class people upon the dependent."ⁱⁱⁱ Education by example; education by identifications structured within public policy and institutional discourse.

If the museum's publicity has the function of structuring popular identification with bourgeois privacy, it does so first simply through its visibility and accessibility: open "on a regularly scheduled basis," it offers up the content of homes to public display. Secondly, as "a nonprofit tax-exempt organization," often with direct municipal subsidy, the museum imposes popular investment in itself, in as much as the museum comes to that population already with the population's economic support. Thirdly, on this, the museum's real 'debt' to the public, is superimposed a symbolic debt of the public to it: a debt produced by the philanthropic gestures of the patrons who provide it with much more visible support. The museum thus draws a population into a cultural contract, obliging that population to make itself "worthy" of capital's gifts. Finally, after indebting a population to it and thereby obliging that population to enter it, the museum offers to it, as its own, what has already been turned into 'public' culture.

If culture consists of the narratives, symbolic objects and practices, with which a particular group represents its interests and its experience, its history and possible futures, fine art represents the interests and experiences first of the professional community of primarily middle-class artists who produce it, and secondly of the bourgeois patrons who collect it and represent it in museums with their names along side those of its producers. The museum, as a public institution, offers up fine art as the general public culture, a national or even universal civic culture and turns it into the single cultural currency that can be traded by members of the civic community.^{iv} The museum's patrons are represented as being in primary and privileged possession of this cultural currency, while all of the symbolic objects produced outside of the specialized sphere of publicized artistic activity are banished to the oblivion of individual lives, without authority to represent 'public' experience.

ⁱ National Endowment for the Arts, *Museums USA* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974), 4. Other criteria used to determine whether an organization is a museum include: facilities open at least three months per year, an operating budget of a minimum of \$1,000 (in 1971-72), ownership of at least part of the collection exhibited, and at least one full-time paid employee with academic training.

ⁱⁱ *Museums USA*, 25-25. In the late 19th century, the educational purpose of museums was articulated as "improving public morals by improving public taste." These days, one more often hears the more modest "promoting public awareness of art."

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter I. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1974), 97.

^{iv} Art museums, like public schools historically, may in this way function to foster a material impoverishment of local cultural practices. In New York City for example, the aim and direct effect of instituting a public school system—or rather, a public school tax—in the mid-19th century, was to prevent most immigrant Irish from sending their children to Catholic parochial schools, for which they would have to pay again. Thus public schools functioned to break down community organizations by forcing a mass investment in a public sphere controlled of course by an American-born Protestant bourgeoisie.