Paper for AICA Annual Congress
The Cultural Power of the Curator: The Role of Market Forces
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Nearly a year has passed since a show called "Sensation" lived up to its title and drew a storm of self-righteous opinion down upon the none too unsuspecting Brooklyn Museum of Art. Not by coincidentally the show featured the private collection of an advertising executive, Charles Saatchi. His promotion of a show likely to enhance his collection's value provoked the *New York Times* and others to accuse the museum of "lending its imprimatur to Mr. Saatchi's investments, which he could sell at any time."[1] Similarly, the auction house Christies was attacked for sponsoring a show that would enhance profits from an eventual sale.

Other New York museums rushed to distinguish their policies from Brooklyn's. Michael Kimmelman reported in the *Times* that The Museum of Modern Art, "by contrast, never presents any exhibition of a private collection unless the collection is promised to the museum, precisely to avoid this."[2] However, we may wonder whether this or any other policy could insulate museums from charges of insider trading under present conditions in the market for art. We should also beware assuming that insider advantage is a new phenomenon, since a careful look suggests that the possibilities have been endemic for some time.

Today Hollywood stars, media moguls, and the dot.com instant rich buy art like stock certificates only to squirrel it away. How, then, can museum trustees be faulted for collecting in knowledge about shows scheduled for the future, before public announcement risks increasing value and reducing availability? Such trustees routinely lend works from their collections to shows, which help validate their taste and insure their investments while assuring access to works that might otherwise disappear from public view.

Suspicion concerning vested interests and unregulated activity in the art market has also grown of late because museum curators and directors now shift routinely back and forth between the non-profit sector and commercial galleries and auction houses. No wonder that artists have increasingly wanted to take over responsibilities from curators who seem more and more like investment advisers to the very rich. This breakdown of boundaries between

[1]Michael Kimmelman, "After Long Silence, Biggest Museums Joined Fight," ***The New York Times***, September 29, 1999, p. B5.

[2]Kimmelman, "After Long Silence," p. B5.

professional roles in the art world opens culture to the charge of control by commerce in a time of greedy opulence. Everybody, it seems, now wants a piece of the high stakes action.

Yet market forces have long played a role in determining the content of exhibitions and collections, and in the conduct of museums, as I will show by drawing upon my research as a critic and historian of twentieth-century art. Since the Museum of Modern Art was so quick to proclaim its purity as opposed to the sensation in Brooklyn, let us begin with a look at its history.

In 1929, just months after its founding, the new museum organized its second exhibition with the title "Nineteen Living Americans." In order to form the list of nineteen artists deserving recognition, the Modern's fourteen trustees agreed each to select fifteen artists from a list of over a hundred that been drawn up by a committee chaired by the museum's director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Because the trustees could not settle upon as few as fifteen favorites, an additional four were added. By what criteria did the trustees choose? Take the case of Edward Hopper, who made the final show. By 1929 one or more of his works appeared in the collections of five trustees, including Duncan Phillips, who had praised Hopper three years earlier in a book and would later feature Hopper in a museum of his own. Another trustee, the editor of *Vanity Fair* magazine, Frank Crowninshield, had featured Hopper in an enthusiastic article. It is evident, and not only from this example, that the trustees voted to include artists that they collected, supporting their collections' market position.

Nor has New York's august Metropolitan Museum of Art shied from showing private collections. Often enough the Metropolitan's efforts in this regard have later been rewarded by major donations, although sometimes the efforts have backfired. One that got away rather quickly was the collection amassed by the television personality Allen Funt. Shown at the Metropolitan from March through April 1973, as "Victorians in Togas: Paintings by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema from the Collection of Allen Funt," the collection was auctioned just over six months later, on November 6, 1973, at Sotheby's Belgravia in London as *The Allen Funt Collection of 35 Important Works by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema.* The auction house's use of the word "important" was justified by the preceding exhibition at the Metropolitan.

More recently, in 1998, controversy was sparked by an exhibition at the Metropolitan of the work of the late Judith Rothschild, an artist whose parents, Herbert and Nanette Rothschild, amassed not only a fortune but, with guidance from their daughter, a major collection of modern masters that the museum coveted. The choice of Judith Rothschild as one of the few women artists honored with a solo exhibition at the Metropolitan caused consternation among contemporary women artists.[3] They were dismayed not only by the quality of Rothschild's work, but also by the show's subtitle, "An Artist's Search," which they believed would never have been chosen as the title of a male artist's show.

The history of another smaller New York institution, the Whitney Museum of American Art, is no more pristine. At the Whitney, what is called "patron development" not only extends to its exhibition programs, but also to the private sale of art works to collectors deemed worth courting. The immense bequest of the works of Edward and Jo Hopper in 1968 found the Whitney unprepared. Led by Lloyd Goodrich and John Bauer, the museum's first response was to get rid of Mrs. Hopper's paintings, which the trustees viewed as lacking value, whether intrinsic, commercial, or even documentary. The Whitney then began selling off parts of Edward's oeuvre, until a halt was called to quiet an irate press. In 1973, before the sales were stopped, Louis D. Cohen, one favored collector in the Whitney's orbit, was allowed to purchase one of Edward Hopper's watercolors from the museum at an advantageous price. He then promptly moved to Florida and two years later, sold his entire collection to the Hunter Museum in Chattanooga, Tennessee, leaving the Whitney out in the cold.

My own first-hand experience as a museum curator confirms that such practices are rampant and unregulated in American museums. Since most of our art museums are tax-exempt private institutions that function without the promise of any government funding, they must constantly raise funds both to support their programs and to enhance their collections. As the price of art snowballs in a booming economy, museums cannot easily compete in the marketplace. Instead, they must rely on the generosity of their trustees and extended circle of patrons. It is a complicated task for each museum to keep its supporters loyal, indeed to know which trustees are deeply committed to the institution for the long run. In New York, certainly, each museum is competing with several others ready to step in as opportunities present themselves.

Together this competitive environment and history of missteps suggest that the activities of museums need to be regulated, but this would not be easy to accomplish. Certainly the de-acquisition of collections is one area that needs to be controlled. Private sales by tax-exempt institutions suggest that not all potential buyers receive equal opportunity. Often, institutions, such as those cited here, prefer to avoid publicity and controversy when selling art

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[3] Judith H. Dobrzynski, "Questions Over Met's Show of Minor Artist," August 11, 1998, p. 1.

works from their collections, even if the price received is lower than a public sale would bring.

But what about regulating the organization of exhibitions in museums? This would not appear to be possible or even desireable. Shows are organized by curators on staff or by guest curators, who today might be critics, scholars, dealers, collectors, or artists. Traditionally, living artists have always had the ability to control the organization of a museum show of their own work. Witness Chuck Close's decision to derail an exhibition of his work at the Metropolitan because it was not slated for the museum's most prestigious galleries, preferring instead to have his show at the Museum of Modern Art.

Today commercial galleries organize exhibitions including loans from museums and tour these shows to museums around the country. Sometimes scholars are hired to serve as guest curators and impressive catalogues are produced. All exhibitions, whether in galleries or museums, are useful for enhancing the "market share" of an artist or body of art works. At the same time, the gallery also obtains access to works still lingering in private collections and potentially for sale by the gallery.

It is clear that it is not so much the "cultural power" of the curator that appeals to so many contestants, but the "market influence" of the curator. How to keep cultural activities from drowning in market forces is an increasingly difficult problem, but we have been coping with these issues for longer than we care to remember.