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A Response to Barabási and Shekhtman

Adam Levine

Albert-László Barabási and Louis Shekhtman's article on the funding sources of American art may not deliver major revelations, but it begins to probe institutional funding structures in novel ways. Neither institutional critique (cf. Hans Haacke; fig. 1) nor probing analyses of art-world finances are new,[1] nor are analyses of board overlaps.[2] Even so, the attempt to use computational science—namely, network analysis—to understand how museums are supported is a worthy development.

The Guggenheim Cancels Haacke's Show

By GRACE GLUECK

Because of policies that "exclude active engagement toward social and political ends," the Guggenheim Museum has canceled an exhibition by Hans Haacke, the artist, scheduled to open April 30.

Thomas M. Messer, the museum's director, said yesterday that the exhibit he objected to most was a set of photographs and documents relating to real estate held by two New York organizations. One was a large parcel of slum properties owned by a family group; the other was a cluster of commercial properties possessed by two partners.

"I'm all for exposing slumlords, but I don't believe the museum is the proper place to do it," Mr. Messer said. He noted that he also had reservations about a questionnaire Mr. Haacke proposed, which would develop a profile of museum visitors by quizzing them on such matters as their income, political and economic views and ethnic background.

Yesterday both Mr. Haacke and Edward Fry, the Guggenheim curator who organized the exhibition, expressed anger over the cancellation. "It's a clear case of censorship," the German-born artist said. "Mr. Messer was familiar with my work, and I had no reason to suspect that any of it was unacceptable to the museum. I only learned of his qualms this past January, after I had worked on the show for six months and it was only in mid-March that he wrote me specifically.'

Mr. Fry said, "I'm angry. I consider this a very serious matter, and it should be an important occasion for the museum to re-think its role in relation to artists and society."

The 35-year-old artist, whose work has been categorized under the critics' rubric of "conceptual art," says he thinks in terms of "systems—the production of systems, the interference with and the exposure of existing systems, physical, biological and social." He has exhibited at other New York museums—the Modern and the Jewish.

Libel Seen Possibility

In a letter to Mr. Haacke dated March 19, Mr. Messer intimated the possibility of a libel suit against the museum if it displayed the proposed real estate survey, publicly exposing "individuals and companies whom you consider to be at fault."

He added that "a muckraking venture under the auspices of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation also raises serious questions," since the museum's charter directed it toward "esthetic and educational objectives that are self-sufficient and without ulterior motive. On those grounds, the trustees have established policies that exclude active engagement toward social and political ends."

He also observed that "art may have social and political consequences but these, we believe, are furthered by indirection and by the generalized, exemplary force that works of art may exert upon the environment, not, as you propose, by using political means to achieve political ends, no matter how desirable these may appear to be in themselves."

Haacke Replies

In a statement to "all interested parties," prepared with the aid of his lawyer, Jerry Ordover, Mr. Haacke said "Mr. Messer is wrong on two counts: First in his confusion of the political stand which an artist's work may assert with a political stand taken by the museum that shows his work; secondly in his assumption that my pieces advocate any political cause. They do not." He noted further that the works contained "no evaluative comment."

He said yesterday that he had offered to make modifications in the real estate survey "in ways that would not affect their integrity." His plan was to substitute fictitious names for the property holders while retaining their real initials, and generalize the addresses of the principals involved in the commercial properties, while retaining the actual addresses of all the properties themselves.

But on April 1, Mr. Messer wrote to him in an official cancellation letter that the exhibition "as presently conceived by you is not acceptable to us." Mr. Messer said yesterday that he had offered verbally to reschedule the show if Mr. Haacke could think of a different way in which to construct the social system portion of his show.

Peter Lawson-Johnson, president of the Guggenheim Foundation, parent body of the museum, said yesterday that he backed Mr. Messer "100 per cent." "Based on conversations with our lawyer, I didn't see any point in taking unnecessary risks," he added. "Another thing—our by-laws do not provide that we should serve as a forum for controversy."

Seats for 'Merriwell' Will Sell for $5 Each

The Broadway producers of a new musical, "Frank Merriwell," announced yesterday that all orchestra seats will sell for $5 each—about the level they were some 30 years ago.

Sandy Farber and Stanley Barnett, the producers, are the first to roll back their prices under the new "limited gross" agreement reached this year with the various theatrical unions. The pact between the League of New York Theaters and the unions is designed to lower production costs and at the same time lower ticket rates.

The musical, written by Skip Redwine and Larry Frank, will open April 29 at the Longacre Theater. Larry Ellis will play the title role of the American mythical hero.

Entertainment Events

Films
TODAY

Opera
TONIGHT

Concerts
TODAY

Cabaret
TONIGHT

Fig. 1. Grace Glueck, "The Guggenheim Cancels Haacke's Show," *New York Times*, April 7, 1971

Although the data are incomplete and the consideration of museums with an express focus on American art is narrow, that there are no great new insights is itself a meaningful finding. Indeed, it is an important result that the authors validate art-world intuition: that there are winner-take-all effects in the museum world. Some of this phenomenon likely has to do with local economies, as suggested in the paper, but much of it is also undoubtedly attributable to other reasons (e.g., greater brand visibility for larger museums, enhanced by greater exhibitions budgets; more dollars spent on public relations; staff and resources to travel and meet new donors, etc.).

Observing, however, that big organizations have differential access to resources (enabling them to get bigger) is a separate consideration from whether these larger organizations have healthy financial models or are more successful in fulfilling their missions. The amount of money raised and the number of donors at any given institution certainly speak to the presence (or not) of *effective* fundraising practices; whether those metrics indicate an *efficient* operation or the delivery of *impact* is a different question. It is possible, for example, that the Terra Foundation for American Art's grants to the New Britain Museum of American Art were more impactful to that institution than the foundation's gifts to the Whitney Museum of American Art or the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. The foregoing is a strictly hypothetical question—the Whitney and Crystal Brides are both extraordinary institutions—but future analyses should understand the distinction between the size of a gift and its use/impact.

It is also important to note that, given the nature of the data as reported in the 990, the analysis conflates gifts *of* art, gifts *for* art, gifts for *capital*, and gifts for *endowment* with gifts for the operating budget. The authors cannot be faulted for the vagueness of the data, but it would be helpful to segment giving by type. Consider a simple case: a museum normally draws from its endowment at 4–5 percent of a 12–20-quarter rolling average. That means a $1 million gift will yield $50,000 (at a 5 percent draw) when vested; however, in the first year, it will yield only $10,000 (assuming both that the money is given all at once and that the museum uses a 20-quarter average draw formula). Consider, then, that a $50,000 gift earmarked to be spent down immediately could drive more impact in mission fulfilment in the short term than a $1 million endowment donation.

The larger donation, of course, has greater long-range impact *and* enhances sustainability, which leads us to a crucial point: one great benefit of a private philanthropic model is the ability to build up an endowment, which ideally allows for sustainable funding with minimal restrictions.

There are myriad downsides to a private philanthropic model, including the chance that large donors will hold outsized sway, and there are legitimate equity issues around how endowments get created. However, such critiques apply to any model with a strong concentration of funders, including one in which a government is a primary supporter. Just as Kenneth Arrow empirically demonstrated that there is no perfect voting system,[3] for similar reasons there is no perfect support structure for institutions serving the public good.

With this in mind, there is another possibility lurking in the data, one that at least typifies my experience as the director of the Toledo Museum of Art, and that is that we should allow for the possibility that at least sometimes, and perhaps much of the time, capital *follows* a vision rather than *sets* it.

I appreciate all the good reasons and real-life case studies that exist for people to "follow the money," but Barabási and Shekhtman's argument—like many other forms of institutional critique—elides the structure of a museum's donations with the culture of its governance. An institution's management has agency, and while those leaders are ultimately accountable to the board, healthy boards let directors and their staffs lead. Similarly, ongoing grant funding from a foundation could represent medium- to long-term alignment of institutional interests and missions rather than just friendship networks among trustees. It would be interesting to know, for example, how many grants the Terra Foundation gave to the Whitney before any current individual trustee sat on the board. Perhaps the relationship between the foundation funder and the museum is longer-lived than with any individual.

Barabási and Shekhtman are data scientists, and their helpful contribution gives visible and digestible structure to phenomena many of us have intuited in the art world. The article, though, from the outset identifies itself as taking a critical posture. Critique is healthy, and it is warranted, but there are other, deeper interrogations of the data that are required to give a better sense of if money flows influence strategic decision-making as much as is supposed. I suspect the answer will be that in some cases it does and in others it does not. There are questions we can ask of the data to tease some of that out, and we as a field can and should do a better job of reporting textured data to help researchers like Barabási and Shekhtman fill in the gaps.

Adam Levine is the Edward Drummond and Florence Scott Libbey President, Director, and CEO of the Toledo Museum of Art

Notes

[1] Andrea Fraser, *2016 in Money, Museums, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

[2] Joel H. Levine, "The Methodology of the Atlas of Corporate Interlocks," *Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, no. 17 (1988): 20–58.

[3] Kenneth Arrow, "A Difficulty in the Concept of Social Welfare," *Journal of Political Economy* 58, no. 4 (1950): 328–46.