

The Performance of Generosity: How Philanthrocapitalism Shapes the 'Art World'

In Rosemarie Trockel's 1994 film *Continental Divide*, the artist splices herself (using a doppelgänger) into the twin positions of interrogator and interrogatee. In a darkened room, she demands over and over again 'who is the best artist?' The names Trockel supplies in answer to this self-interrogation are taken from the first edition (1993) of an annual list compiled by the German magazine *Focus*, which uses a 'formula' including market value, age, nationality, and gender to determine the 'answer'. This routine, reflected elsewhere in the ArtReview Power 100 and the artist rankings on *artfacts.com*, is a banal indication of the equation of success with money, power, and competition in the 'art world.' Crucially, these market-oriented value judgements raise important questions about the forces that shape taste-making and, ultimately, determine who is able to be (and be sustained as) an artist within the contemporary 'art world' on all levels.

In a 2017 article published on e-flux conversations, Morgan Quaintance demonstrates an increased complicity between public and private money across UK art institutions. Via Thatcherism and New Labour, Quaintance maps a trend of institutions increasingly coupling up with private finance in the face of ever-dwindling government funding, resulting in a homogeneity across structure, staffing and programming which he dubs 'the new conservatism.' As Quaintance suggests, this increased reliance on private and corporate sponsorship gives rise to 'profound' contradictions, like naming the Switch House extension at Tate Modern after Leonard Blavatnik (who donated \$1 million to Donald Trump's divisive, racist presidential campaign) while staging the exhibition *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*.¹ Here, we will briefly track some of the contradictions set up by the interests of private and corporate 'benefactors' – and their institutional and personal effects.

Contemporary philanthropy has roots in deeply troubling histories. It carries with it Victorian ideological legacies of the deserving and undeserving poor (and their contemporary echoes in the systematic withdrawal of state funding from the most vulnerable across the UK in recent years) and the contaminated histories of figures like J.D Rockefeller in the US, whose medical foundation (from 1914) was a direct actor in eugenic studies and programmes of forced sterilisation.² The private money flowing through the 'art world' even now comes from sources who have sought to manipulate people and politics in pursuit of wealth and influence. In the last couple of years, the ways financial donations have been translated into 'art world' cultural capital and social standing in the UK and the US has come under increasing scrutiny. This has included Nan Goldin and P.A.I.N's campaign against the roots of the Sackler family's 'philanthropy' in dangerous opioids, pressure from Decolonize This Place and artist groups pushing into view the brutality of (now former) Whitney Chairman Warren Kanders profiting from the instruments of state violence against mainly POC in the USA, the Mexico border, and Gaza; and art community pressure on Yana Peel to resign her position as CEO of the Serpentine due to her partial, indirect ownership of the NSO group, which is accused of licensing spyware to authoritarian regimes. The powers at work in extraction and use of this wealth clearly have global significance.

Tate (as the most visited group of galleries in the UK) and the precedents set by its former long-term Director Nicholas Serota offer a useful starting point in examining the move towards greater, US-style private sponsorship within UK cultural institutions. Serota's tenure as director of the Whitechapel Gallery (1976-1988), then at the Tate (1988–2017), and subsequently at Arts Council England (from 2017) mirrors the neoliberal timespan noted by Morgan Quaintance. Serota has long been an enthusiastic advocate for philanthropy, but without passing comment on the policies of social inequality which make it seem necessary in the first place. In 1983, while under Serota's direction, the Whitechapel Gallery announced that its new *Whitechapel Open* exhibition was to be sponsored by Barclays Bank, which at the time participated in the Apartheid regime in South Africa. This corporate sponsorship was an important precedent in the UK 'art world'. At the time, there was widespread outrage: all Artist Union members scheduled to participate in the exhibition withdrew their work, circulating a letter encouraging others to do the same and holding an alternative exhibition next door. Sadly, this type collective refusal did not become a sustained part of the 'art world' and the Artist Union folded that same year in step with the wider erosion of unionisation under Thatcherism. Looking backwards from our position as recently-initiated participants in the 'art world', this feels like a compelling moment of slippage into a field which has been characterised for decades by an unregulated individualism, symptomised by phenomena like the celebrity-focussed obsession with the YBAs (and successive waves of selected young artists since) and the accelerated ceding of control public institutions to private interests via corporate and individual sponsorship.³

In 1990, with Serota now heading up the institution, Tate began its partnership with BP – a funding relationship which only ended in 2017 after a sustained effort by activist groups. Despite Platform London calculating that the sponsorship from the 'world's third worst contributor to the climate crisis' amounted to just 0.5% of Tate's annual budget on average,⁴ Serota continued to give them glowing praise. In the wake of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010, he said 'you don't abandon your friends because they have what we consider to be a temporary difficulty.'⁵ In 2008, Serota was instrumental in securing an unprecedented tax break for life-time giving when Anthony d'Offay sold the collection now known as Artist Rooms to Tate and the NGS for £26.4 million (the price d'Offay originally paid, rather than the contemporary valuation of £125 million). The DCMS (ie. the public) covered the resulting £14.4 million in income and corporation tax. While Serota heralded it as an 'extraordinary act of philanthropy', it is crucial that this narrative does not obscure the fact that d'Offay made his money back, was spared a huge tax bill, and did so without having to liquidate his company.⁶ Most importantly, d'Offay became the beneficiary of superlative public admiration from UK politicians. The deal with d'Offay became the starting point for a concerted lobbying campaign by museum leaders for increased benefits for philanthropists, a drive which melded with the coalition government's tandem 'policies' of 'the Big Society' and 'the Big Arts Give'.⁷

The primacy given to philanthropy by figures like Serota excuses and perpetuates a system that reproduces profound inequalities. One problem arising from this model is that wealthy individuals are effectively able to purchase dominance through 'giving'. In d'Offay's case, a personal collection which represents a myopically white and male survey of art has somehow become Tate's prize pony, profoundly undermining their stated mission to represent a broad and diverse public. This would be problematic enough in its own right, but unresolved questions over serious and detailed allegations made to the press about

d'Offay persist. Though contact was briefly suspended between him, Tate and NGS in 2018, it is clear that the favour he accumulated in 2008 has embedded him thoroughly in the institution.⁸ Both the narrowing of institutional taste via private interests and abuses of power that reproduce racism, sexism, and other biases within institutions produce barriers to who can be welcomed or supported by them.

It also has to be kept in mind that philanthropy arises from and within capitalist agendas, emerging as philanthrocapitalism. The reflex is one of investment, either in financial or cultural capital. Where investment is the aim, risk will always be a deciding factor. There is widespread concern among smaller arts organisations that private donations result in a narrowing of participants and agendas. This has effects from a focus on 'blockbuster' exhibitions at larger institutions (which again means the persistence of a normative white, male narrative), to smaller, 'riskier', non-London based organisations being closed out. As one small arts project based in Bradford put it in a Government research paper: 'we are not really "sexy" enough for many individuals / organisations. We fear that only the commercial / popular work will get supported.'⁹

Philanthropy, therefore, has to be understood as a gatekeeping mechanism – one which is glaringly obvious in the context of the Zabludowicz Art Trust in London. The family's connections to Israeli state violence against Palestinians are well documented by BDZ (Boycott Zabludowicz). The Art Trust artwashes these operations with the generous gesture of deciding who are the best 'emerging' artists via their 'Zabludowicz Invites' programme. Where emerging artists are given few opportunities in a risk-averse 'art world' in which it is hard to make any money from your practice, let alone stay afloat, it is clear that, as BDZ state, "'emerging' London-based artists are targeted by the Zabludowicz Collection.'¹⁰ By posing as risk-taking, they have cannily cemented themselves as part of a young London art scene. Sadly, too many of us maintain their relevance by visiting their exhibitions or even undertaking the Faustian pact of accepting their kind 'invitation'.

When large-scale philanthropy is being encouraged to plug the gaping holes in public funding, it is crucial to remember that this kind of giving is undemocratic by definition. Via tax breaks, charitable foundations are subsidised by the public, but operate without a public mandate. Rather than the distribution of funds being informed by a body accountable to the public, they are scattered according to the whims and personal taste of the super rich, who are free to 'shape society in their image'. A focus on persuading philanthropists to give more via tax breaks obfuscates the real problem at work: that deep economic asymmetries are to blame for the lack of public funds in the first place.

From our perspective, the threat issued by Yana Peel that the refusal of plutocratic control of arts organisations means that 'the treasures of the art community – which are so fundamental to our society – risk an erosion of private support'¹¹ (which is tacitly supported by Serota's obsession with private funding) rings hollow. At the grass roots, the benefits of private funding are vanishingly small. The landscape we have experienced as young artists so far is a partial, fragmented one that, in its scattered distribution between public and private interests, lacks any cohesive vision of how to support artists throughout their careers and overcome a slippery, trend-based engagement with identity. Our hope is that the collective work it has taken to rupture previously accepted funding pacts over the last couple of years is a sign of a grassroots refusal not only of dubious funding, but of a capitalist trajectory that insists on expansion at all costs. From ground-level, the 'Blavatnik'

Switch House looks expensively unnecessary: what if institutions focussed more efforts into seeding and sustaining the artist communities that are supposed to be at the centre of it all rather than spiraling ever upwards and outwards? There has to be a way out of the zero-sum game reflected back to us in *Continental Divide* – refusing to play by the rules is our best hope.

¹ Morgan Quaintance, *The New Conservatism: Complicity and the UK Art World's Performance of Progression*, conversations.e-flux.com, 2 October 2017.

² Susan Rosenthal, *Philanthropy: the capitalist art of deception*, socialistreview.org.uk, May 2015.

³ Laurel Forster & Sue Harper (eds.), *British Culture and Society in the 1970s: The Lost Decade*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, p.60.

⁴ Platform London, *Mind the Gap: Contradictions in Tate's ethical decision-making over BP*, platformlondon.org, June 2015.

⁵ Jamie Merrill, *Tate galleries forced to disclose the extent of controversial BP sponsorship deal*, independent.co.uk, 23 December 2014.

⁶ Godfrey Barker, *Art & Craft*, Evening Standard (accessed via <https://www.pressreader.com>) 27 June 2008.

⁷ Will Gompertz, *The Big Arts Give: an Age of Philanthropy?*, bbc.co.uk, 6 December 2010.

⁸ Ben Quinn and Cristina Ruiz, *UK art dealer Anthony d'Offay faces sexual harassment allegations*, theguardian.com, 14 January 2018.

⁹ Culture, Media and Sport Committee - Third Report: Funding of the Arts and Heritage, *Philanthropy and private investment in the arts and heritage*, publications.parliament.uk, 22 March 2011.

¹⁰ boycottzabludowicz.wordpress.com

¹¹ Naomi Rea, *Serpentine Galleries Director Yana Peel Resigns, Blaming 'Toxic' Allegations About Her Links to a Cyberweapons Company*, news.artnet.com, 18 June 2019.