

GEORGIA PHILLIPS-AMOS

Book Review: *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest*

Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest by Laura Raicovich. Verso, 2021. 224 pp./\$26.95 (hb).



“Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association,” Theodore Adorno famously accused, in 1953.¹ Adorno believed that objects preserved in museums lose their vital relationship to the world; that, in being anchored for viewership, they die.

1. Theodor W. Adorno, “Valéry Proust Museum,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shiery Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967).

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Laura Raicovich's new book, *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest*, seems to come from a love of art institutions and an ongoing commitment to keeping their contents in the land of the living. She argues that these spaces can keep from growing stale only if a diverse public feel welcome to visit and reinvent them. Raicovich celebrates activist groups such as Decolonize This Place (DTP), whose annual Columbus Day "counter-tours" prompted the removal of a statue of Theodore Roosevelt from the front steps of New York's Museum of Natural History. Long defended by the institution as a neutral preservation or "freeze frame" of history, the statue, as Mayor Bill de Blasio acknowledged, "explicitly depicts Black and Indigenous people as subjugated and racially inferior."² Its maintenance at the museum's threshold was not neutral but explicitly racist.

"Neutrality," Raicovich explains, "is a veil that conceals the ways in which power is wielded and maintained, making its workings invisible; it is 'just the way things are'" (141). Rather than accept the way things are, Raicovich—no doubt emboldened by no longer being the public face of an institution—questions the settler colonial myth of neutrality that remains a founding value of most museums. Raicovich has previously served as interim director of New York's Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, president and executive director of the Queens Museum, head of Global Initiatives at Creative Time, and deputy director at Dia Art Foundation. With *Culture Strike*, she casts light on the often-looted origins of museum collections, the politically biased sources of funding that founded and that now support these spaces, the curatorial processes that decide which artworks are acquired and presented to the public, the powerful and often opaque role of the museum board, and the unwritten, yet palpable, rules of public comportment within institutional bounds.

Raicovich unravels each of these lines of inquiry by looking to how museums handle crisis, from Nan Goldin's iterative Prescription Addiction Intervention Now (P.A.I.N.) protests against the use of Sackler Family funds (sourced from the manufacture and sale of highly addictive opiates) in major museums internationally, to calls for repatriation of looted artifacts and the removal of monuments, to the Whitney Museum's failure to effectively address calls to remove Warren Kanders from their board of directors or Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* (2016) painting of Emmett Till from the 2017 Whitney Biennial, to the Walker Art Center's more generative response to Dakota-led protests over the installation of Sam Durant's *Scaffold* (2012). For Raicovich, these interruptions to business-as-usual are openings for understanding and reimagining the ways museums work and for whom.

The book's premise, that museums are not neutral spaces and that treating them as such both obscures and curtails the social and material politics by which they operate, is not new. Michel Foucault, Ann Stoler, Douglas Crimp, Allan Sekula, Sven Spiecker, Ruth B. Phillips, Jeff Thomas, Saidiya Hartman, and many others have long warned of

2. Bill de Blasio, qtd. in Robin Pogrebin, "Roosevelt Statue to Be Removed From Museum of Natural History," *New York Times*, June 21, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/arts/design/roosevelt-statue-to-be-removed-from-museum-of-natural-history.html.



IMAGE 2. Prescription Addiction Intervention Now (P.A.I.N.) protest at the Louvre Museum in Paris, July 1, 2019; courtesy P.A.I.N.

the subjective, narrow, and *powerful* nature of archival narratives. Experience at the helm of the institutions that establish such narratives makes Raicovich uniquely well positioned to make visible and critique, with intimacy and ease, the ways the art world in the United States operates. In her 2017 nonfiction book, *At the Lightning Field*, which documents a series of visits to Walter De Maria's 1977 land art piece in New Mexico, Raicovich proved herself to be an essayist of formidable range. She has proved the same in *Culture Strike* by succeeding in composing a text that is critically rigorous but at the same time creative in pulling from her personal and professional experience with careful attention, humor, and a penchant for revelatory digression.

Culture Strike is born in what Raicovich calls “an age of protest” (1). In January 2015, five months before Donald Trump launched his openly xenophobic campaign for the US presidency, Raicovich assumed her role as president and executive director of the

Queens Museum, the largest museum in a borough of New York City that is home to one third of New York's total immigrant population. In the first four months of Trump's presidency, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrests increased by 40 percent from the previous year. By September 2017, Trump had announced his intent to phase out protections for child migrants under the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policies (DACA), which five percent of the Queens Museum's own staff were reliant upon. During Trump's first year in office, he also became the first US president to threaten to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts budget. The museum as a public institution was caught in the crosshairs of a polarizing political agenda, and, yet, when Raicovich suggested to the board of directors that the museum join other arts institutions in declaring itself a sanctuary space, she was met with the conviction that a public institution "should not, and indeed could not, 'take sides'" (6). The museum's commitment to maintaining a so-called neutral position superseded its commitment to its immediate community and its own employees. Further opposition from the board in the months following Raicovich's position not to rent museum space to the Permanent Mission of Israel to the United Nations, for a speech by then Vice President Mike Pence, eventually led her to leave her post in January 2018.³

Strikes, boycotts, divestments, and other acts of protest draw illuminating attention to what they address or remove themselves from. Raicovich defines protest as "an act of radical care" (71). She calls for reimagining and demanding more from our cultural institutions in acts of speculative generosity for how these spaces might improve. *Culture Strike* follows the spirit of Aruna D'Souza's *Whitewalling: Art, Race, & Protest in 3 Acts* (2018), which unpacks three incidents of publics calling for New York institutions to address tacit and explicit racism within three exhibitions across three decades: the 2017 protests at the Whitney, the 1979 protests at New York's Artists Space, and the 1969 protests in reaction to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's "*Harlem on My Mind*": *The Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968* exhibition. Rather than establishing a lineage of protest in a single city as D'Souza does, Raicovich's focus is on how recent "targets of critique" (71) have received and responded to their publics.

In response to the 2017 Indigenous-led protests against *Scaffold*—an artwork that featured an elevated gallows representing the 1862 public execution of thirty-eight Dakota men by order of President Abraham Lincoln—Durant, the white American artist, wrote, "your protests have shown me I made a grave miscalculation in how my work can be received" (69). The work, which was previously shown in Europe without criticism, is a composite of the structures that held seven public executions by hanging sanctioned by the US government between 1859 and 2006. It was, however, met with protests from local Dakota elders and activists when the Walker Art Center arranged for it to be shown at the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, on unceded Dakota land. There, activists perceived the work as a trivialization of—or, worse, a monument to—the

3. It was with this speech that the administration announced the decision to move its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem—a significant shift in US policy—and yet, for fear of public repudiation, hosting this event was deemed the "neutral" position to take.

massacre, rather than a critique of mass incarceration and capital punishment. Just as no museum is neutral, Raicovich insists that no imagined public can be regarded as “universal.” As well as a formal apology, Durant responded by handing the copyright to the work over to the Dakota community, who initially planned to set it on fire before finally opting to dismantle and bury the structure. Raicovich commends the way in which the Walker Art Center and Durant were able to eventually pivot from a plan of displaying the gallows that did not consider an Indigenous audience toward mediation with Dakota elders and reparative action.

At the core of *Culture Strike* is a simple insistence that museums must not “forget their public” (71), as American librarian and museum director John Cotton Dana warned in his 1917 essay “The Gloom of the Museum.” Raicovich suggests that we “re-imagine museum interpretation through the lens of an *exchange* of knowledge with publics rather than *broadcasting* to them” (167, emphasis original). She suggests that we follow the rare models set up by initiatives like the Rhode Island School of Design’s “Look at Art. Get Paid,” which paid people who would not typically visit museums, or participate in their running, to be guest critics of both the art on display and the institution itself.

Defenders of freedom of expression on both the left and right in North America have balked at “cancel culture” and specifically opposed any suggestion that works of art that offend should not be shown. *Culture Strike* runs counter to this line of defense, calling instead for more nuanced accountability, collaboration, and an overall *slowing down* to allow time for inclusive and intentional decision-making. Closures, like the Museum of Modern Art’s recent shuttering to overhaul its entire collection to be less linear, white, male, and heterosexual, are framed as necessary steps in the right direction. Arts practitioners, the public, museum board members, and staff are called on to move beyond a “fear of public failure” (62) to being open to controversy and responsible to one another, even if this means delaying or *cancelling* an exhibition as planned, repatriating an art object, opening a forum for discussion around removing a work, or even physically destroying an art object that reenacts trauma. Rather than see these actions as censoring, in Raicovich’s telling, these are the moments that ensure our museums keep their pulse. Her prose itself is notably accessible and useful for anyone working within arts institutions, who may be invested in thinking through how these spaces might be reconfigured in the future; for art historians studying the contemporary political and institutional contexts within which artworks are circulated, cared for, and displayed; and for the public—the pulse itself—who should have its full and open say. ■

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