

jump JM *Corot*

**Cash, class and Culture at the
Metropolitan Museum of Art**

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TO FRIEDA

Every man, woman and child... has an inherent right to be able to see, at least occasionally, good works of art... It is part of the 'pursuit of happiness' which our Declaration of Independence declares to be our American birthright.

Robert De Forest, President, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1919.

Tell your next boyfriend

I am a Communist : I believe that all things belong to those who love them most.

Philip Lopate.

ART

is
free
everywhere
and everywhere we wait in line.

I] THE THREAT AT THE MET

And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. Dostoevsky.

Seven days a week, lines form in the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The lines lead to any number of cash registers. Closer in you'll notice a sign that reads "Admissions recommended \$25.00." Actually, you'll read **Admis-sions** in bold, and in smaller letters: *recommended*, then further down the actual prices—*suggested* prices, or maybe not: over the past forty-four years, or as far as I remember, the phrasing, size and color of the announcement have changed. The phrase has slithered back and forth from "recommended" to "suggested" to "requested," with occasional slips into "Please pay the suggested price." Same back-and-forth for size, style, placement and wording: the Museum must have a consultant to help them make it hard to read and harder yet to figure out, these things are never left to chance. Last time I squinted the lettering for *recommended* was about an inch-and-a-half high, back-lit yellow against a brown background in one place, smoky-gray background, translucent in another. Back in 1970 when this all started, the "suggested" fee was one dollar, roughly \$6.00 in today's dollars; now it's twenty-five a pop. (Or mom; it's free for kids.)

That consultant is a genius: in places the light shines straight in your eyes; some signs are illegible at thirty feet, close up they're merely gibberish if you're a foreign visitor or one of many immigrants or foreign-language speakers who live in New York City. If you need to have the policy explained in German, French, Italian or Whatever, go to Information and ask for a brochure: they're kept behind the desk. The woman there explained to me that they hide the brochures because they have to keep track of how many people request them—why they can't count the bro-

chures at the beginning of the day and count them again at the end and figure out the difference, is beyond me. Plus, it's not a brochure, it's a museum map with the admission fees explained at the back in ten-point type. The French brochure explains that the admission fee is "conseillé," which means *advised*, not *suggested*. The German uses the word "empfohlen" which, like the French, has a strong whiff of the Kommissar—*Alles klar?* So does the Italian "consigliato." Not that too many Italian speakers will have noticed: last time I checked that particular brochure listed the admission fee as \$20.00, which hasn't been consigliato since 2011. *Consigliato, sconsigliato.*

There are signs in the Great Hall (online as well) telling you "Admission to special exhibitions is free with regular museum admission," which suggests that regular museum admissions aren't free, doesn't it? Other signs tell you there are special fees for groups of ten or more, which might make you think that groups of ten or more get a discount, right? That special discount means a free ticket for the group leader: pretty sneaky, considering that the Museum claims the right to charge admission to professional tour guides and lecturers in accordance with its old agreement with the City of New York. (The Met runs its own profitable tour and lectureship service, which raises the separate question, whether it's restricting trade by charging extra to the competition.) In theory you could tell my friends who sell the very special tickets at the Group Tours desk that you're just the leader of a group of friends and weren't planning to lecture; then your group would get to pay a penny apiece, which until further notice is the legal definition of a free entrance to the Met. Then you, as the group leader, would get your free-as-in-\$0.00-free admission sticker (as opposed to free-as-in-one-penny), except, since in exchange you'd agree not to lead your group you wouldn't be the group leader, would you? Thirty-five years lecturing at the Met and I'm still trying to figure this out.

The Met stands in Central Park on land owned by the City of New York, in a building City-built; maintenance and guards are City-paid. In exchange, admission to the Museum building is free, and has been free since even before it opened, in 1880. So why do we all continue to pay for admission to a museum that's free by law, by tradition and by right?

In 1970 the Museum and the City decided together that "free" meant you're supposed to pay a penny minimum; the Museum decided it was going to twist your arm to get the rest, and the City looked the other way. Forty-three years and a couple of lawsuits later, a judge decided there's nothing wrong with a little "nudge," and isn't a penny the same as free? And isn't it a fact that the Met only charges admissions because it needs the money? If the Met were asked to actually let in folks for free it would

01* go broke, then nobody could get in for free.

So it's all settled: not according to facts or laws but assumptions about facts and norms of behavior—and political expediency. This is America, where "sue me" is the law of first resort; where politicians look the other way; where basic services and protections that are the right of all turn into special favors for the few; where a petty piece of chiseling on the level of selling rotten vegetables goes on for years, and goes on still. This is what sociologists call a "total social fact," a little dust-ball of cultural behavior that, once unraveled, explains the social system as a whole, along with the system of coercion, economic or not, that sustains it. Your penny paid falls into that widely studied form of behavior curiously called *the Gift*. What an exchange of blankets was to Kwakiutl Indians, the Met's admission policy is to New Yorkers: a fact of life. The Way Things Are Or Else.

And, as in all cultures, there are varying levels of competency among the players. In New York, where getting in for free plays the same role as the Vision Quest among Native Americans, the

* Numbers in the margins refer to webnotes, which can be found at jimcorot.com.

mark of election is the quiet knowledge that you can pay whatever you want to get into the Met as long as it's a single cent. When I was young my great-aunt Frieda (bless her red-bright soul) brought me to the Museum so we could split the penny fee: Art was valuable because it could be shared. Plus, she was partly blind and wanted me along to tell her about the pictures: that's how I fell into this life of depravity and Art.

02

Now suppose you haven't got the savvy; or you don't like making trouble; maybe you've had this Commie-share-y thing beaten out of you. Or you're new to New York: you understand, dimly, what the signs tell you but you're not quite sure what that means to an American, or a New Yorker, or an educated insider, let alone a Commie. You're sure whatever it means does not apply to you. Any day at the Museum I hear visitors trying to figure out the risks: Humiliation? Deportation? Maybe it's like buying a rug in the Grand Bazaar: "Honey, see if you can bargain them down..." Of course you can buy your ticket ahead of time, online, and spare yourself those mobs and throngs of hordes you've read about in the *New York Times*. At least you'll spare yourself the worry of having to decide whether you should pay or not, or how much, since tickets bought online are redeemed at another desk where there's no sign about requests or recommendations or anything at all. You can even buy a membership and skip the line entirely! They start at \$70.00...

"We're not shy about asserting that we ask visitors to pay whatever they can," says a Museum spokesman. Are we not shy, as well, about asking our employees to pester the visitors, and lie to them? A former supervisor recently confirmed that ticket vendors are systematically pressured by Management to squeeze as much as they can from visitors; does that include training sessions to teach the vendors to not be shy about asserting visitors must pay? Are vendors paid a commission, like sales staff at a

chain store? Perhaps they're given a quota, like cops stopping inner-city residents. More likely, as with the cops and the admission fee itself, it's always known but never stated: low-level employees are left to understand that you don't get ahead by giving out information or being nice to the wrong kinds of people, or by holding off on those who seem most vulnerable. Surely, what the spokesman meant was: "It serves the purposes of the Met's Director and its Board of Trustees to imply that the most unpleasant things might happen to recalcitrant visitors, and we're not shy about suggesting you, too, might get some unpleasantness if you resist; nor are we shy about leaving employees with the impression that they're strongly encouraged to twist arms." The *New York Times* says that paying less than full price would "risk the disapproving glance of a ticket agent," but then the *New York Times* is to the Metropolitan Museum of Art what *Izvestia* was to the Kremlin: for decades the publisher and part-owner of the *Times* was a member, then a Chairman of the Board of Trustees at the Museum, and the *Times'* art reviews still read like PR releases—or like a scoop on obscure power struggles. What other newspaper would print an editorial protesting the display of a mangy shark in formaldehyde just when the curator responsible was being considered for the post of Director?

03

I've seen plenty of disapproving glances at the Kremlin, by the way, but I've rarely seen a disapproving glance in my forty-five years of Met-going. What I've seen a lot, especially in the past few months, is cashiers who refuse to make change, or refuse to take my credit card. And I hate it when my friends at the admissions desk blush and stare into the distance when someone asks about admission fees. That's not unusual in America: Management passes on the dirty work to junior staff. Most of my friends at the Met are pretty good at working for the visitor, against the boss, but I hate to see them forced into taking sides, and I hate to see a business badly run. This would never happen in France,

where being rude is a sacred duty to Nation, Capital, and Boss, at least among those who never learned to tell the three apart. I guess that's why it's called the Hostility Industry.

So what happens if you refuse to pay the voluntary-requested-suggested-conseillé-empfohlen-consigliato fee? Our tell-tale supervisor says he used to have the security officers "forcibly remove" any visitor who dared refuse to pay, and I can well believe it: in America the distinction between "insisting on your rights" and "disorderly conduct" is as subjective as the distinction between "Suggested: \$25.00" and "Suggested—or else." I've never resisted an officer or been ejected from the Metropolitan Museum of Art; it would be nice to know the difference.

Of course that's just my tweedy-bird experience, but who's to say all this unshyness doesn't change from day to day according to the looks of the visitor or the language spoken? Are staff instructed (or quietly encouraged) to vary their pitch according to the visitor's perceived vulnerability? As the Met spokesman explains, a third of the Met's visitors are foreigners and they "tend" to pay the full amount requested. I'm sure the Met makes the tending easy. An Offer You Can't Refuse: there's your real New York Experience, right up with three-card monte and sure-to-ticket parking signs. Is it because a real-estate hustler heads the Board of Trustees that the Met sells the cultural equivalent of a balloon mortgage to the ignorant and vulnerable? As with mortgages, the politicians and the Law look the other way.

And do certain segments of certain ethnic groups, both in New York and out, habitually fear that others will think they're trying to get things on the cheap? (I mean Jewish people.) Or get away with something to which they're not entitled? (You know: *culture cheats*.) Young people, people of color, the elderly or people with low incomes, or foreigners, are more likely to feel intimidated or embarrassed even before they enter the Museum;

that must be the purpose behind the cops and security staff at the entrance to the Great Hall, checking into bags and cases, because I can't think of any other: those bags get dropped off in the cloak-room, a few feet away.

I once overheard a guard telling another: "Why are we doing this, again?" I guess he wasn't up on his sociological theory: you see, if you let people get away with small things like carrying a bag or not paying admission or not fixing a broken window, that'll tell them they can get away with bigger things, like mugging tourists or not paying admission. Your visit to the Museum's just another stop-and-frisk routine: it's not what you've done, it's what's presumed you might do. As for the poor, the young, minorities and the vulnerable: the fear of being pressured should be enough to make them pay the full amount if it doesn't keep them away to begin with. Teachers tell me they send their students to the Museum after carefully explaining the free admission policy; the students get to the Museum, check out the hassle factor, and then go back to hang on the steps: no wonder there are even fewer people of color inside the Museum than outside. Back in 1970, before the Museum started having people line up to pay a penny or more, African American attendance was around 2%. Today, at a fair guess, it's lower than a half of a percent. It's well established that minority attendance at museums goes up with free admissions—not to mention a hassle-free environment. Is the unstated, unacknowledged, and blithely unconscious purpose of the Museum's admission policy to drive minority attendance down? Even in New York, the runner-up for most segregated city in America, the Met shines forth like an upside-down urinal.

Of course I haven't factored in the school children of all races who are regularly bused in with a teacher in tow. And of course the children wouldn't come to the Museum if the teachers and the Teacher's Union and the Met's Education Department and

the whole world of not-for-profits organizations-making-a-nifty-profit-thank-you weren't there to make a nifty profit bringing them in. When educators brag about those grants and programs offering free admission to the kids they mean "a visit to the Museum, *free* of intimidation." What else could they mean, since the Museum's free to begin with? What the Mafia is to the mom-and-pop storefront, the Museum's Education Department is to the kids: a cultural protection racket shielding them at the back door, for a fee, from the fear and the intimidation that the Museum promotes at the front.

04

Does the Museum (any museum) really need the money, or is it run along the principle that it needs the money whether it needs it or not? Is giving the impression that the museum needs the money more important than the money itself? The Met's receipts from admissions aren't much higher than the cost of guards and ticket-takers and personnel put there to make sure admissions are collected: so what's the real dynamic between economic needs and social policy, between cold cash and human relations? As long as Art is treated like a commodity—something you can exchange for cash—then those who live from that commodity as something you can use (for enrichment, for pleasure, for prestige) will be divided into opposing and conflicting camps: visitors and Trustees; the guards, the curators and the staff,

while the bare analysis of labor without more [...] is bound to come up everywhere against the inexplicable.

05

Like most museums in the Global Economy, The Metropolitan Museum of Art has some explaining to do: What are the trade-offs between the museum as a business in a capitalist economy, and the museum as a cultural institution in a capitalist culture? And what's the real purpose of the museum's admission system: raising the money, or turning your museum visit—anybody's museum visit—into a game of Cultural Roulette?

(You could ask yourself the question, art-lover: "Do I feel lucky?")

II] WORKERS' COMP

How to give all access to the masterpieces of art and nature, is the problem of civilization. The socialism of our day has done good service in setting men on thinking how certain civilizing benefits, now only enjoyed by the opulent, can be enjoyed by all. For example, by providing to each man the means and apparatus of science, and of the arts. Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Social harmony is praised most often by those who've done the most to destroy it. In the years leading up to the Civil War, Americans of the respectable class found themselves facing the inexplicable: mass immigration from Europe and with it, urban poverty, were an insult to their sense that in this country no man need work for another, no man should be dependent on another, no man would want to. The new urban poor were an embarrassment to the economic elites of the Northern states who were struggling to define America's Westward expansion as one of "Free Men, Free Soil, Free Labor," wrenching control of the new territories from the Southern slave economy. If, as Southerners argued, the freedom in Free Enterprise was no better than slavery, then Northern businessmen had no political or moral advantage over the usual type of slaveholder. In 1853 Frederick Law Olmsted (future architect of Central Park, designer of the National Parks, planner of the Metropolitan Museum and America's most influential landscape designer) was touring the South and writing economic dispatches for the *New York Times*. From the dark night of his Free-Market soul, on a Mississippi steamboat crowded with gamblers and gunmen he wrote:

I must be a Socialist Democrat. We need institutions that shall more directly assist the poor and degraded to elevate themselves... All that these sort of free traders want is protection to capital... I do very much [feel] inclined to believe that Government should have in view the encouragement of a democratic condition of society. The poor need an education to refinement and taste and the mental & moral capital of gentlemen. Hurrah for Peter Cooper and Hurrah for the Reds.

Peter Cooper was no red, not quite; he was a wealthy industrialist and investor who weeks earlier had opened New York City's Cooper Union, a free school for working men and women: free in the sense of free tuition, and because the school was open to any working person, male or female, on a first come, first-served basis. For a while it would hold a museum of Old Master paintings as well—a free museum. Olmsted's socialism was little more than a turn toward Arminianism, America's old-fashioned religion from the mid-eighteenth century on: those who choose Jesus are saved, not by Jesus but by the fact that they themselves have chosen to be saved. What Would Jesus Do? He'd do good works in a sinful world, not to improve it since it's sinful beyond salvation; not to be saved but as a sign of his own salvation. The inwardly saved and the outwardly successful are one: he who has the most charities in his name when he dies, wins.

06

Those were the self-absolving justifications for furnishing the toiling masses of Manhattan with Central Park, an expanse of Nature on a progressively crowded and commercialized island; of course the Park would hike up the value of surrounding real estate as well, but anyhow ahem a park would provide the poor and the tubercular with the fresh air they needed to improve themselves though, as one reformer pointed out, if the intention was really to give the poor a chance at fresh air it would be more efficient to build houses for them that actually had, you know, like, windows? Since the poor were hopelessly sinful to begin with (why else would they be poor?), the best one could do was offer them harmless distractions from their nasty, brutish lives. Parks are there to show us how unregenerate we are compared to Nature, "Where every prospect pleases / And only man is vile." (Actually, that's Brooklyn.) And if those sound like the views of some vegan freak from Harvard Yard it's because they're the views ascribed to Olmsted by various Puritans, ecologists and social activists today; but if those were Olmsted's views on Nature what's a museum doing in Central Park?

07

Olmsted and his contemporaries credited the initial inspiration for the Park and its museum to Andrew Jackson Downing, America's first landscape architect. Downing held to the European Enlightenment view that Parks, like Art, are a refinement of Nature, not Nature itself: museums and parks serve to improve, not simply to distract. Shortly before his death he argued that the future Central Park should include monuments and buildings "commemorative... of ... the genius of our highest artists:"

Open wide, therefore, the doors of your libraries and picture galleries, all ye true republicans! Build halls where knowledge shall be freely diffused among men...

In 1858 Olmsted was brought on as planner and architect of Central Park in partnership with Calvert Vaux, Downing's disciple, former partner and relative by marriage. Olmsted's vision began to closely resemble Vaux's and Downing's:

[Central Park] is of great importance as the first real park made in this country—a democratic development of the highest significance & on the success of which, in my opinion, much of the progress of art & esthetic culture in this country is dependent.

Of the three, Vaux was the most unambiguously committed to the benefits of Culture. Born in England, he took from the English moralist and art critic John Ruskin the belief that art and nature serve at once to express and to inspire the surrounding culture; beliefs that inspired and reflected the optimistic American tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson, popular in New York's intellectual circles and salons. People were naturally wise, Americans even more so; they were capable of making up their own minds: perfectly capable of improving themselves, by themselves. The purpose of Society was to remove all barriers that prevented men (and women as well, as Vaux and Emerson made clear) from pursuing the finer things of life, be they trees, artworks or scientific specimens—you know, that Pursuit of Happiness thingie. Olmsted envisioned Central Park as a series of vistas: he would wander through the Park at night, adjusting and

imagining its “atmosphere,” whereas Vaux saw knowledge and experience unfolding in space. Vaux’s theories are still reflected in the Park, and in the little that remains of the original structure of the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Nature transformed, but transformed through the particular genius of the American People.

08

In 1862 the New York State Legislature granted the New-York Historical Society, New York’s oldest museum, the use of the Armory building that still stands at 65th Street and Fifth Avenue. The Society was hardly a museum at all, more of a private collection: admission was on the sufferance of its members. With the end of the Civil War in 1865 the Society was increasingly seen as a throwback to Old New York, elitist and restrictive, incapable of meeting the needs of an expanding consumer base for art in the vertiginous economic expansion of the new era. As the popular critic Henry Tuckerman complained,

New York is nobly supplied with Hospitals and Libraries, but she lacks one Institution essential to a great civilized metropolis,—a permanent free Gallery of Art. [...] The surprise and delight exhibited by the thousands of all degrees, who have visited the Picture Gallery of the Metropolitan Fair, has suggested to many, for the first time, and renewed in other minds more emphatically, the need, desirableness, and practicality of a permanent and free Gallery of Art in our cities.

(The Metropolitan Fair was a fund-raising charity for Union troops held in 1864. Catchy name, you think?)

The difficulty wasn’t so much the absence of American museums and galleries as their impermanence, due to their wildly speculative nature. The newly installed branches of European galleries in New York (notably Goupil and Knoedler) could afford to invest for the long term; American startups could not. Only a museum that wasn’t dependent on admission fees could hope to survive. In 1865, after P. T. Barnum’s highly successful, superbly speculative and thoroughly unregenerate American Museum had burned to the Broadway curb, a writer for a new reformist

journal, *The Nation*, used the occasion to argue for a new type of museum free of financial imperatives, with free admission for all, located in Central Park. The author dismissed the notion that Barnum's museum was cheap because admission fees were low: the garishness of the displays was driven by Barnum's need to raise income, not by the natural crudeness of the visitors. If it were possible to construct a quality museum in, say, Central Park, and offer, say, free admission, the best and the brightest of all classes would attend: selection must be on the grounds of innate interest and talent, not the ability to pay.

But of one thing let us be certain. No individual or stock company which may undertake to form and manage a museum as a way of making money will be of any great or permanent service to the community.

The author was responding to the commonplace utilitarian argument that "private vices beget public benefits," popularized by Jeremy Bentham and still common today among Vicious-Americans. Education, entertainment, access to parks and museums should not be left to "the wretched and unchristian spirit of 'let alone'"—what we call the Free Market. Free admission and freely given support would encourage the best of the public (not merely the richest) to gravitate toward the best in culture. The vice of greed could not beget the virtues of citizenship. All Emersonian, and directed (if not aimed) at Olmsted, who was on the *Nation's* masthead. The article reads like a public version of Vaux's and Olmsted's private correspondence; it could have been directed at their mutual boss, Andrew Haswell Green, Comptroller of the Parks Commission and arguably the single most influential person in the development and planning of New York City. Green had decided early on "that the public might aid by financial means" to build museums, libraries and zoos, but that "the collections should be made by private contributions" and their management "intrusted to intelligent citizens: men of leisure and scientific men." That was Green's notion of how

the City should be run; it's the way the City's run today. Museums, libraries, parks and bridges are run by the elites; the Great Unwashed get soaked. Greene had learned the lesson of Capital: you don't get rich by producing stuff or selling stuff or owning stuff, you get rich by controlling how stuff is owned and produced and sold. That was the self-appointed mission of "the class who have the largest pecuniary stake in the good order of the city and who also command its moral forces," with the understanding that it's the pecuniary stake that provides the moral force.

Barnum, meanwhile, had been working behind the scenes, trying to get articles planted in the papers suggesting that he, Barnum, was the man to run the much-anticipated Museum of the Future—as a paying institution, of course. The article in the *Nation* put the kabbosh on those plans. Barnum responded two weeks later with an elephant-poo-eating letter: he, Barnum, would be delighted to build a quality "Free National Museum" next to the tawdry, charging one; and if the free museum failed, why he'd donate the collection to a "Free Governmental Museum" located in Central Park. Even in free admissions, Barnum saw free money. So did Green, though Green was more discreet.

09

Two years later the *Evening Post* ran an editorial, "A Free Art Gallery for New York." Its publisher, William Cullen Bryant, had been, with Green, one of the early boosters for Central Park:

No effort is made by [the New-York Historical Society] to induce the presence of the public... The traffic in works of art, both foreign and native, has reached enormous proportions... There should be a permanent public gallery....admission to which should be either free, or for so small a fee as not to exclude any class in the community... New York has no great public free art gallery.

Bryant added that, should any institution found "a public and permanent gallery of art, it would not want for outside pecuniary assistance." Where that assistance was to come from he didn't say, and he didn't have to: contrary to elitist belief, America has

a solid tradition of Government support for the arts, depending on which branch of Government does the supporting and what is meant by Art—depending, in other terms, on who pays and who benefits; a strong tradition of support for the arts, and a lousy tradition of support for artists. Throughout American History there have been public works and pumps to be primed, but the Founding Fathers felt that these profitable opportunities should be left to the states: in Washington, DC the Mall (originally designed by Downing) and the Capitol are instances of Government support for the Arts, as are the various State capitol projects and the vast programs of civic (or at least, public) sculpture that have enriched New York and enriched a few New Yorkers on the side. The point of contention, from the seventeenth century down to the present day, has not been whether Government should fund the Arts but whether in so doing it should strengthen private monopolies: In the War of All against All that defines the American view of the role of the State, Government is there to see that some get the missile launcher and others the pea-shooter.

10

In May of 1869 the New York State Legislature finally agreed

to erect, establish, conduct, and maintain in the Central Park in said City, a meteorological and astronomical observatory, and a museum of natural history and a gallery of art, and the buildings therefor, and to provide the necessary instruments, furniture, and equipments for the same.

The State was willing, not only to welcome a museum, but to fund its construction; later it would agree to fund its maintenance as well. The site was selected and Vaux drew up the plans: it's the same building today, except that Vaux's original, brick-and-mortar concept has been smothered under rich man's marble.

No time to lose. On November 23 the Art Committee of the Union League Club of New York called a general meeting of the arterati. Everybody was there, Darling: Bryant, Olmsted, Vaux, Green, the presidents of various art academies, a fistful

of artists, a storage of collectors, a mess-of-pottage of politicians, a brothel of businessmen. The Legislature was willing to fund a museum of art as distinct from a museum of scientific specimens and curiosities; it was not yet clear what an American art museum should be, least of all a museum in the public interest. George Fisk Comfort, founder of art-historical education in America, gave the keynote and called for an institution that would “give the best opportunities for cultivating the taste of the poor freely and without cost.” C. C. Cole, the brother of Henry Cole, the founder of London’s free, government-supported, worker-oriented South Kensington Museum, received an ovation. Another speaker argued that since “we attach but little value to that which costs us nothing” the Museum should be paid for and maintained through local taxes, which after all cost everybody something. Whether those taxes would fall on the population at large or on the real-estate speculators who had most to benefit from the Park and the Museum, was not addressed.

American entrepreneurs have a tradition of expecting Government funding for the arts, or for anything that gives them access to the cookie jar. Unfortunately for those assembled at the Union League that day, the New York cookie had just passed into the hands of “Boss” Tweed and his gang of Democratic cutthroats. Tweed’s men now controlled the City and the State Governorship, and the Republican cutthroats who dominated the Union League were left to pick up the crumbs. As Bryant explained,

Our nation [is] the richest in the world, if quietly to allow itself to be annually plundered of immense sums by men who seek public stations for their individual profit be a token of prosperity.

Bryant was equally suspicious of Tweed and the Republicans: both were potentially crooks, but they were crooks with different styles. Like its upscale counterparts the Tweed Ring understood “social improvement” as a direct path to private enrichment, only slightly more direct is all, and with considerably more incentive

to spread the wealth among the immigrant poor through public work projects. The plutocrats conceived of Government as both the source of largesse and the protector of private investment. Plunder is too important to be left to the lower classes.

Central Park was a case in point, and there was every reason to believe the new museum would follow its example. The Park land alone had cost over 10 million dollars, more than the State of Alaska, mostly to buy off real estate speculators. The bonds had been bought up by the same speculators, with the expectation of being paid back, with interest: skimming off the money at either end and in the middle and getting the Government to pay them back with interest for borrowing to pay themselves back for whatever projects they'd initiated. In America as in most capitalist countries it's not the Government that needs the money,

I2 it's the money that needs the Government.

A "Committee of Thirteen" was chosen and charged with the initial planning of the Museum's organization and the first draft of its Charter. Joseph H. Choate, a prominent lawyer, would remain the most engaged of an influential group of wealthy politicians and industrialists who envisioned the Museum as a training school for workers: like many industrialists and politicians of the later nineteenth century in America and in Europe, Choate thought museums, like libraries, could enhance the productivity of labor by improving the smarts, the knowledge and the ambitions of the working class. These ideas had entered the mainstream of American thought by way of Henry Charles Carey, the influential economist who had served as Lincoln's adviser—Marx called him "the only original economist among the North Americans." Then there were the artists, who naturally wanted the Museum to raise the appreciation and acquisition of art—preferably theirs. Yet others endorsed access to art as a moral rather than economic imperative, in step with the free public schools that were gradually understood to be a funda-

mental right of the citizenry. Vaux and Olmsted both sat on the Committee, along with Andrew Haswell Green and Henry G. Stebbins, President of the Central Park Commission. Obviously the Museum would not go forth without their support and implicitly, that of the State Legislature which had appointed them.

The concept of free admissions survived in the provisional constitution submitted by the Committee of Thirteen on January 4, 1870, which states that the Museum's mission is to afford "to our whole people free and ample means for innocent enjoyment." Meanwhile, at the first general meeting of the Union Club's Arts Committee a motion to add another twenty artists had been rejected; at the following meeting the same committee was packed with additional businessmen. By January of 1870 a participant was privately sharing his concern that this larger committee might not be "solely animated with a zeal for the interests of Art and the glory of our Metropolis and the good of Humanity." The plutes were closing in.

January 17, 1870 was to be the first, the official, the founding meeting of the "Association [...] organized under the name of the Metropolitan Museum of Art," except it never happened. There's no trace of it in the official histories. This was the same meeting at which (supposing it had happened) a motion would have been filed to strike the part about free admissions from the Charter; the meeting from which three of the wealthiest members would have promptly resigned; where, as the *New York Times* explained with its usual pretense of knowing everything while understanding nothing,

It did not appear. [...] that any one present had a clear idea of [...] where the funds are to come from... [...] from half a million to one million of dollars will be required.

Of course everyone knew where the money was going to come from; the difficulty was that the State might demand something in exchange. The years immediately following the Civil War

mark the era of Plutocrats Gone Wild. As in all wars, the states and the Federal Government had survived through massive issuance of bonds; soon the “money capitalists,” as they were called, discovered they could bribe their state or Federal government to hand over rights and monopolies and land grants, and float the bonds to underwrite whatever enterprise they chose—railroads especially. A number of Museum trustees must have decided that enforcing free admissions on a museum the Government itself was funding constituted Government intrusion, an argument that had some standing prior to 1876, when the Supreme Court ruled that if states have the right to fund whatever corporations they want, they also have the right to regulate them. In the meantime the free admissions idea had been dropped from the Charter, yet on January 31 a slate of officers supportive of the free admissions policy was voted in. The Museum now had two conflicting roles: beside its original mission as an instrument of social improvement, its new mission was maximize its capital. The Committee report for February, 1870 held a caution:

There is a large class of objects... of inestimable value toward the formation of sound taste in Art, which can be had in great completeness by a comparatively moderate expenditure....

The *Times* quoted an opinion that the new museum would require, not a million, not a half-million, but ten million dollars. Wherever those funds came from, they were never going to be enough: within a year, and with advice from the art speculator James Jackson Jarves, the *Times* had grasped the concept of art as capital and the museum’s function as one of permanent accumulation. The *Times* and the Museum have never looked back.

13 Culture was the new global growth industry. In 1866, at a Fourth-of-July picnic in the Bois de Boulogne in Paris, a group of American businessmen, collectors and politicians had floated the idea of an American museum: members of that group were in attendance at the November meeting of the Union League Club—the

Chair of the Arts Committee found their plans “objectionable” and “not to be commended for their wisdom.” For years American artists had complained to the US Congress about the dumping of European art and artists on the American market—the original Eurotrash. The dollar was rising steeply against European currencies, and since paintings escaped the high tariffs on imports, European Old Masters were a better investment than local painters. S. Robinson Gifford, who served on the “Committee of Thirteen” and had earlier signed a petition protesting the marginalization of American artists by foreign competition, saw his name removed from the list of Founding Trustees and his paintings blacklisted; other American artists suffered the same indignity. Within a few year the Hudson River School would be declared officially dead for the purpose of investing—as it still is. A decade later, when tariffs were finally raised on imported art, American speculators were driven to riskier buys in Europe, Impressionists, for instance, whose prices could be pumped up after they’d been brought over. The Met’s monopolistic hostility to living local artists would become legend. The Museum has never dropped its habit of buying overpriced, often doubtful “Masters” on the trustee’s speculative recommendations, or buying out the trustee’s own mistakes. One of its best-known paintings (donated by some Vanderbozo) was titled *Looking for a Safe Investment*. You can’t make these things up.

14

Goya: he’s a dark, lonely artist but somebody’s gotta show him. By July of 1871 the Governorship as well as a sizable portion of the Legislature were in the sticky hands of Boss Tweed. And when the Museum officers approached Tweed with a petition to fund the Museum, the Boss passed it over to his right-hand man, Peter “Brains” Sweehey, who now was in charge of the Parks Commission, replacing Green and Stebbins. Said Sweehey to the supplicants: “As representatives of the city we must control that building,” which sounds ominous in the Republican

retelling, and was. Sweeny was a lawyer specializing in buying and selling concessions, and he took the application for a Charter as intended: as an application for a commercial franchise. What Tweed and Sweeny wanted was oversight over the Museum and its construction for themselves instead of Green, Stebbins and Olmsted: whoever controlled the Parks Department controlled the graft. The only question was, who would be Chief Engineer on the Gravy Train? By year's end Tweed himself had been indicted and died in jail, but the District Attorney refused to prosecute Sweeny, whose son went on to head the City's legal department. Today, thanks to Tweed and Sweeny, and just as Sweeny, Tweed, Green, Stebbins and all intended, the Parks Commissioner sits on the Museum's Board of Trustees, as does

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the Mayor, the City's head of Cultural Affairs *et al.* No "Brains."

Still, and to this day, the Trustees have held on to their initial fantasy that they, and they alone, have absolute control over how the Museum shall be run, and to whom and for what purpose admission shall be granted. When in February of 1872 the Museum first opened in rented quarters, admission was free—by application to the elite. This was merely an extension of the much-resented policies of the New-York Historical Society, the Astor Library, and other old New York institutions that were accessible only by invitation of the membership or trustees. Even before the Museum was built the Trustees began to charge for admission to their temporary quarters "for the rent and other necessary expenses of exhibiting collections which would be virtually free to the people," meaning they had to charge admissions in order to ensure that admissions would be free. The trustees starting at .50 cents or about twice the hourly wage of a plumber. No one came; they cut the price to .25 cents. No one came. Then they started to experiment with Free Mondays, and visitors, especially working-class visitors, came pouring in; then Free Mondays and Thursdays, and even more came. By the

time the Museum had moved to Central Park the Trustees were down to Unfree Mondays and Tuesdays, and again no one came on those days. Was it that the wealthy weren't interested in Art, or that the wealthy didn't care to display their privilege, or that even the wealthy resented the implied elitism?

In April of 1876, as the building approached completion, the Legislature formally designated the Parks Department as the party responsible for negotiating a lease with the Museum of Art. Olmsted, whose affection for the aristocracy of wealth was stronger than some but not as strong as others', tried to spell out the rules. He wrote to the Parks Commissioners, outlining the contract he hoped to see negotiated between the Park and the Museum, suggesting "certain general conclusions which, in my judgment, may be wisely adopted," in order to promote

the policy which has been heretofore adopted, and which is already, to a certain extent, in successful operation in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.... A contract between the city and a society, for the purpose, under which the city would give the society the use of land and aid in obtaining buildings and collections, while the society would give the public the use of the same at certain times, gratuitously, and at others in payment of moderate admissions fees, and would undertake the current expenses of the enterprise.

By then Olmsted was in no position to set policy: he had recently been "granted" a leave of absence; two days afterwards he was dumped from his position as Parks Superintendent. He later wrote a bitter pamphlet accusing the Commissioners of playing politics (pandering to the Democratic politicians, that is) and suggesting that the Museum did not belong in the Park after all, though perhaps for moral, rather than aesthetic reasons: with Olmsted it's hard to tell the two apart. Finally, on June 3 the State Legislature authorized the Commissioners to negotiate a lease with the Museum; on Christmas Day, 1878 a perpetual lease was signed between the Museum and the Parks Department, fairly close to Olmsted's suggestion except that admission

fees, moderate or otherwise, were nowhere mentioned: neither in the lease nor in the many acts of the Legislature down to the present day. (The lease does state that if its conditions are not met “it shall be lawful” for the Parks Department to give six months notice to vacate. I can’t wait for the fire sale.) The Museum was given free rein to charge or not charge on the Days of the Unfree; free rein, that is, to find any number of ways of suggesting that freedom of access was the exception, not the rule—charging Mark Twain for storing his walking cane, for instance. (“Leave my cane! Leave my cane! Then how do you expect me to poke holes through the oil paintings!”) Initially the Museum was allowed to occupy the City-built building on City-owned land, with City support, rent-free, for as long as it agreed to keep itself open free of charge four days a week from ten a.m. to half-an-hour before sunset and to keep itself closed on Sundays, when a number of trustees thought the workers should be

16 in church instead of gaping at pictures of nekkid ladies.

Yet even before the Met had moved into the Park, resentment over Sunday closings had turned into a proxy for class conflict:

I should like to know... why it is that the [Natural History] Museum at Central Park is kept closed on Sundays as if to exclude the working classes, the real payers of all burdens. Are we really living in a democratic city where a place maintained with public funds is solely for the benefit of the wealthy part of the community?

As with so many class conflicts, this one did not create clear-cut, good-bad divisions. A number of trustees and officers stuck to their original vision of the Museum as an institution for the moral, aesthetic and economic improvement of the working class, notably Joseph Choate, whose wife was an advisor to the Cooper Union. Choate himself had helped to formulate the original Charter, had petitioned the Legislature, and would later attempt to lead a coup against the arrogant, elitist and speculative Director, Luigi di Cesnola. This is the same Choate who, at the opening ceremony for the new building, declared:

But now that art belongs to the people, and has become their best resource and most efficient educator, if it be within the real objects of government to promote the general welfare, to make education practical, to foster commerce, to instruct and encourage the trades, and to enable the industries of our people to keep pace with, instead of falling hopelessly behind, those of other States and other Nations, then no expenditure could be more wise, more profitable, more truly republican.

And US President Rutherford B. Hayes wrapped up the ceremony with a four-word definition of the Museum's mission: *free, popular art education*. Which part of “free,” “popular,” “art” and “education” don’t you understand?

Even before the move to Central Park, the Trustees—or some of them—had taken “especial satisfaction... in observing the number of artisans who visit the Museum.” And in 1892 the State Legislature ordered the Museum to be open, free, seven days a week except for Sunday mornings, plus two evenings a week, and paid out an additional \$70,000.00

upon condition that the collections in the said Metropolitan Museum of Art shall be kept open and accessible to the public hereafter free of all charge throughout the year.

Some 10,000 people attended the first Sunday opening, though the *Times* reported with relief the absence of “Essex Street Polish Jews;” presumably the *Litvishe Yidn* from Eldridge Street were out in full force. A year later the Legislature compromised, allowed two days’ closing and handed out some more cash on condition that the Museum remain free. The other two days could remain closed to the general public but they should “remain accessible to art students, copyists and schools.” Meanwhile, Sunday attendance grew to one-third of total visitors; the number of working-class visitors grew, and as it grew the City increased its contribution.

The Museum’s Annual Report for 1892 includes a response to the Legislature, a miracle of frustrated greed and raging incoherence. The Director and Chairman of the Board simultane-

ously affirmed: 1) that the Met would lose money without its two Days of the Unfree; b) that receipts from those unfree days were minuscule; iii) that the Legislature had sent payments “on the condition that the Museum is kept open and free to the public every day in the year, including Sundays,” but IV) there was no formal agreement that free days were in exchange for Government support; and E) Government funding could legitimately be diverted toward Museum acquisitions. The Trustees (at least some of them) still wanted to believe that Government’s proper and primary role was to provide them with speculative capital.

Early American jurisprudence loosely recognized two types of voluntary associations: public-serving and member-serving. The unmeeting of January 17, 1870 had left standing those two distinct entities within a single chartered corporation: one, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (M1), administered by its trustees; another, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (M2), whose upkeep and accessibility were to be directed by the City of New York for the benefit of the people. M2 was to be run for the public good; M1 was (and still is) run for the benefit of its trustees and their dependents. Only in 1917 did the US Government draw the formal, legal distinction when it instituted charitable tax deductions: to qualify, a corporation had to be free of “private inurement,” meaning that its income—the income derived from admissions, for instance—could not be used to benefit the trustees, or their spouses or nephews or cousins or business partners. Is it a coincidence that in the years immediately following a good number of American museums went all out for free admissions? If paid admissions were meant to convey the artificial impression that museums were run as efficient businesses, free admissions could convey the impression, equally arbitrary, that the museum was run for the public good. By 1941 the Met had thrown in the towel and made itself free and open to all, seven days a week, end of story have a nice democracy.

What remained, as in any democracy, was a conflict between two distinct ways of doing business, each with its social consequence. In 1885 an outraged trustee wrote in private, on the occasion of the Sunday admissions brouhaha:

Now they think the Museum is a public institution, in the management of which the public has a voice. They must be forced to think of it as a private institution...

In 1897, when a “horny-handed son of labor” was refused admission to the Museum for wearing overalls, the penny press was outraged and the Parks Department felt a responsibility to intervene. The Met’s Director, the ignominious Luigi di Cesnola, responded that, thanks to the Museum’s stringent attitude to overalls and those who wore them, one didn’t see

persons in the picture galleries blowing their nose with their fingers.... spitting tobacco juice on the gallery floors, ... nurses taking children to some corner to defile the floors of the Museum.

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Not to mention spitting watermelon seeds or tagging the artworks. That would come later.

III] THE PENETRALIA

First it's a front seat on the bus. Next it's a takeover of parks... Then it's distribution of wealth without work. George Wallace, Governor of Alabama.

Henry James, that acute observer of social hierarchies, observed in 1903 that American cultural institutions were relatively short of “penetralia,” the grand entry halls and staircases that set the tone for visitors in European museums:

It is to be observed, I think, that the people walk there more or less under the shadow of the right waited for and conceded.

In contrast he was delighted by “the ubiquitous children, *most irrepressible little democrats of the democracy*,” and the “graceful common life” of American cultural institutions, which reminded

him of the uninhibited social life of an Italian city: “Social democracies are unfriendly to the preservation of penetralia.” In the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art he found the worst of all worlds: a distinctly un-American style, pompous and hierarchical, in the service of crass American money-grubbing:

One never winces after the first little shock, when Education is expensive—one winces only at the expense which, like so much of New York, doesn’t educate; and Education, clearly, was going to seat herself in these marble halls... There was money in the air, ever so much money—that was, grossly expressed, the sense of the whole intimation.

James had preserved the old Arminian sense that self-realization comes from within; he was disgusted by the Museum’s insistence that it, not the visitor, would take the visitor’s education in hand; and by the equally disturbing suggestion that aesthetic appeal was synonymous with economic power. The Met’s mission was shifting from the formation of workmanlike knowledge, the formation of taste, even, to the imposition on the visitor of a proper relationship to capital.

In America as in Europe from the eighteenth century on, there was a widespread belief among the cultured that Culture itself was contagious—in a good sense. Culture inoculated against lack of Culture, much as chickenpox inoculates against smallpox. Culture, the Culture found in museums and parks and palaces, kept all classes off the slippery slope from vulgarity to disrespect to rebellion. Its effects were defensive: Culture ensured a passive acceptance of the Order of Things—or of Nature, if like most Americans you were apt to confuse the two. What would later be called the Affirmative Character of Culture—its ability to reconcile the viewer to Society—could only exist, under the circumstances, in subservience to capital, as James suggested.

In 1866 in London, another strain of thought, proactive and muscular, emerged when a crowd demanding universal suffrage invaded Hyde Park, tore down the railings, trampled on the

pansies and briefly settled the perennial question “whether this or any portion of [the] Park belongs to a class or to the whole people.” Enter Matthew Arnold, an English Oprah in sideburns whose response was “to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties.” By “our” he meant his own class: the lower orders were to rise to the superior layers of society through Culture and the contemplation of Art.

Arnold’s influence on American educational theories has been incalculable. In the late eighteen-eighties he visited America at the invitation of Andrew Carnegie, the billionaire, to instill in us uncultured Yanks “the disciplines of respect, the feeling for what is elevated.” Or, as a recent Director at the Met put it,

My view of the museum is that it gives you an opportunity to revel in the fact that other beings have surpassed you... I believe in hierarchies. I believe in good, better, best, and I believe the museum’s role is precisely to help people make these distinctions.

By 1893, Carnegie was describing from the Fairway at the World’s Colombian Exposition in Chicago (Olmsted, by now the Dean of Crowd Control, had designed the site)

the remarkable behavior of the crowd, its good manners, temperance, kindness, and the total absence of rude selfish pushing for advantage... The self-governing capacity of the people shone forth resplendently... So much for universal education.

This was the so-called “universal education” James despised, at once stratified and didactic. James thought the future of American culture might be decided, not in a pricey museum façade but in the immigrant cafés of the Lower East Side.

American immigrants had a strong desire to improve their condition, that’s why they’d shipped out in the first place. Their usual means were hard work and discipline, and if those failed, organizing; but the eighteen-nineties marked the collapse of dreams of community and the triumph of Horatio Alger fantasies: hopes of advancement through politics and class solidarity were co-opted by the old Protestant myths of upward mobility

through individual character. Where, for a previous generation of Americans, cultural and economic improvement were two sides of the same coin (whether or not one believed improvement was possible), with Arnold the two were at odds. With Capitalist Culture, to paraphrase Goethe, one does not learn something, one becomes something—or rather “Somebody,” as Oprah might say: not a new self but a true self. Or, as Bourdieu *did* say: through Culture one discovers oneself as embodied capital. Lots of luck with that, Precious.

Marx had dismissed as a nasty joke Carey’s idea that the workers could be turned into capitalists through hard work and dedication, with a little help from their friends. Arnold took up the Marxist argument that the petite bourgeoisie is the class whose interests are with the lower classes but whose aspirations lie with the upper, and flipped it: the historic task of the petite bourgeoisie was to show itself worthy of the superior classes by participating actively on the plane of Culture. With Arnold you could join the upper strata merely by switching channels, preferably to NPR. Being cultured was no longer a passive marker of class, it was a decision to give up your own class and ethnicity, to forgo “all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive,” in favor of “simplicity, realism, comprehensibility,” as Andrei Zhdanov would later explain. Arnold called this Sweetness and Light—sounds like a calorie-free soda, doesn’t it?

At the Met and elsewhere two distinct, conflicting approaches to museum education continued to evolve side by side into the twentieth century: the first, corresponding roughly to the German *Lehre*, was meant to address the productive needs of working people. The other, *Bildung*, was designed to encourage and maintain middle class values through Art and High Culture, sanitized to avoid all reference to class conflict. Culture, Arnold insisted, “seeks to do away with classes,” meaning it seeks to do

away with the symptoms of class conflict while preserving the social relations that determine class. Through Culture the relations inherent in economic exchanges (relations of production) are “transubstantiated” into transactions that present themselves outwardly as exchanges of cultural or social capital while preserving the underlying dynamics of economic exchange: transactions like museum-going, for instance.

20

In 1918 the Boston Museum of Fine Arts switched to free admissions. That same year its Secretary, the ethnologist Benjamin Ives Gilman, wrote:

The right of the public to admission without pay [...] rests on deep foundations. Fine art is in its fundamental character a thing totally diverse from money... The divorce is not complete while money is demanded as the price of contemplation.

Among the self-defined progressives of the museum and the academy, Gilman passes for a museological child molester for his repudiation of the “Didactic Bias,” “the belief that the value of everything and in particular the value of fine art, is chiefly its instructive value.” What Gilman realized, as his detractors do not, is that the “socially active, transformative” mission of museums, whatever its pretense, above all else will serve to bring the visitor into a closer allegiance to the cash nexus as long as an allegiance to cash, even symbolic, is the prerequisite to entry. (They do realize it; they just don’t like to think about it.) Gilman’s book appeared a year after the concept of charitable giving was written into the US tax code, ensuring that any form of giving would be quantifiable. As a scholar well grounded in social theory and an American to boot he was indebted at once to Emerson and the German sociologist Frederick Tönnies, who himself had spent time in America and whose theories had strong affinities with the American tradition. According to Tönnies any one culture can be situated between the twin conceptual poles of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* or, as translated,

Community and Association. An association—a *Gesellschaft*—is a group of individuals organized around specific shared interests and motivated by those interests only as they affect each individual; and Tönnies thought America had swung further toward *Gesellschaft* than any other country. In a *Gesellschaft* the role of the State is to allocate resources according to those needs it determines are those of each individual citizen, not according to the interests of the group as a whole; and in the modern state those needs are measured in cash. Tönnies saw, as Catullus and Marx had seen earlier, that in order for artworks or kisses to be commodities they must be *measurable* as commodities: measurable, that is, in terms of their exchange-value. In the perfect *Gesellschaft* all exchanges tend toward pure exchange-value: toward Price, the Universal Bitcoin.

In contrast, a community is an organic cluster whose motives center around the group—like the Hopi Indians Gilman had studied along with the anthropologist Franz Boas, or the community imagined by Emerson, who suggested that artworks should be held in common in order to “draw the bonds of neighborhood closer;” or the Community of Saints in Dante that Gilman enthusiastically compared to the ideal community of museum-goers:

Because the more there are there who say Ours
The more each one possesses of delight.

Like many social thinkers before and after him (Boas, Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, Benedict, Titmuss), Gilman saw in the Gift, even the seeming gift of free admissions, a universal means of creating social obligations in the receiver. It, too, is a form of coercion, involving relationships of power that are specific to any given culture. Like a number of social thinkers he understood that systems of reciprocity and exchange are radically altered when price is introduced as the absolute standard of value.

For a museum of art to sell the right of admission conflicts with the essential nature of its contents... The office of a museum is

not ideally fulfilled until access to it is granted without pay. The justification of an entrance fee is wholly practical and temporary.

For Gilman as for Aquinas and Titmuss, the only non-coercive gift was that which benefited the community as a whole. For Gilman himself it was aesthetic pleasure that best defined that universal community: the pleasure derived from artworks was the innate motivator of museum-going, similar to that love of God which, according to Aquinas, moves every soul irrespective of social constraints or ignorance. Aesthetic pleasure was not a socially enforced law of motion but a natural phenomenon:

Works of fine art are indeed goods that can be bought and sold; but the art in them is a good free to those, and only to those, who are endowed with the capacity, native or acquired, to enjoy it.

Gilman did not deny the power of works of art to structure the visitor's experience; he did not think museums should be "didactic" by proactively seeking out the public whose experience they hoped to structure. The didactic function of museums is, too, a form of coercion even if, according to some, it's coercion of the right kind. Visitors should be empowered to define their experience according to their own needs, interests, and capabilities. The aesthetic emancipation of the museum-going class must be the work of the museum-goers themselves.

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Because, just as the capitalist dreams up the "economic law of motion" that explains why people buy stuff, just as the savage invents a fetish to rule successful crops, just as the *New York Times* calls on the latest in junk science to justify your hip-but-sensitive lifestyle and Aquinas invents a Love of God that justifies all human desires, so, too, the art historian, the curator, the museum director invent museological laws of motion to explain why people visit their museum: laws that furnish the rationale for seeking out the kind of visitor the museum wanted all along: Prescription as description; "ought" as "is." Others start from the assumption that the laws of capital are universal,

and fashionably bemoan the hopelessness of it all: “is” substitutes for “ought.”

Regrettably, at least to Gilman, the laws posited by museums were a lot closer to those of the capitalist than to those of Aquinas; but in every case it’s assumed the visitor is a “rational actor,” a *sujet supposé vouloir* driven to the museum, the church the Party or the job fair by whatever needs and motives the museum, the Communist, the theologian or the capitalist defines for him, a subject for the object; the major difference lies in the quality of the imputed rationale, non-economic in pre-capitalist societies, non-economic and economic at once in a market economy. The right kind of tribal chief is the one who burns a blanket to best a rival chief; the right kind of New Yorker is the one who pays for her museum visit, whatever the reason stated.

There’s a widely shared belief today that social classes are spontaneously drawn to those practices that define them to begin with; that social divisions are not divisions of class enforced by education and economics, but voluntary ones along the lines of cultural interests, commonly called *taste* among the politically conservative, and often confused with class or ethnic consciousness among the would-be radicals. It’s a commonplace of American thought that certain people—immigrants, Jews or people of color—are less adept at Culture than wealthy Anglo-Saxons: Margaret Dumont knows her Verdi better than Chico Marx. In fact the correlation between socio-economic status and cultural sophistication is weaker in America than most anywhere else: the time will come when Harpo makes a harp out of piano strings; when the wrong people gain access to the right culture. Then all of Margaret’s presumptions will come back to bite her in the Arts. Let be be finale of seem. The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Enter Joe Papp, a communist in the great American tradition; a

communist in the sense intended by Tönnies. Following a common distinction of the later nineteenth century, Tönnies had described the tension between the ideals of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft as the tension between communism and socialism: the first originates (or wishes to return, or in the thought of Marx, wishes to move forward) to a world of organic solidarity; the second sees solidarity as practicable (at least for the time being) in rationalization and control from above. Papp himself was a Communist (as in “Party Member”) into the early ‘fifties, and a communist in the broader sense from early on: not by calling for wealth to be redistributed as a socialist would, but by asking people to act as if it already was. In 1956 he took over one of those band-shells that had been designed to be left unused by an ungrateful people in one of the parks provided by New York’s master builder Robert Moses in the Moses-built slum of Corlears Hook, and offered free performances of Shakespeare. Papp met with enthusiastic response and started taking his show to

just plain people, working men and shopkeepers... A group that would have nicely graced one the city’s anti-discrimination posters... in neighborhoods throughout New York.

As Papp himself put it,

I believe.... that it is of the utmost importance to have a public theater—a theater for everybody—yes, everybody; for those who can afford it and those who cannot.

Even in America there is a felt discrepancy between “free” as in *universally available* and “free” as in *not entailing costs*. Only the wealthy, wrote Emerson, can afford to ignore the difference. Freedom’s just another name for Nothing Left to Buy.

Equality in the abstract, stratification in practice: when Papp first approached the Parks Department over use of the band-shell in Corlears Hook he’d been cautioned that admission must be free. To charge admission would mean he was running a concession—a franchise. Then Papp moved to set up Free Shake-

peare for the rich and poor alike in Central Park, under the same conditions as the Met: that admission should be free, and that the City should support the theater. Robert Moses, who as head of the Parks Commission was also on the Board of Trustees at the Museum, demanded that he charge admission; even better: Papp should take his show back to the slums and charge admission there. Free Shakespeare in Central Park was going to attract “muggers, degenerates and pickpockets,” not to mention workers in overalls. Moses has often been compared to Andrew Haswell Green for his shaping of New York’s infrastructure; the difference is, that for Moses the social structure to be reshaped would now be rigidly hierarchical. As Adorno pointed out, in the traditional theater everybody seems to be witnessing the same thing at the same time from a similar-looking seat, but the cost and placement of each seat defines their precise position in the social hierarchy: it’s okay to have a theater for those who can pay, and it’s okay to have a theater for those who cannot; it’s not okay to have those who can pay and those who cannot placed on an equal footing. The preeminent theater critic Walter Kerr explained to Papp that people don’t really appreciate a performance unless they pay for tickets, which is kinda funny, considering that critics don’t buy their own. What Kerr meant, is that the only people for whom Culture is of value are those who are already aware that Culture is of value to them, meaning those who are predisposed to calculate the anticipated cultural capital to be earned in exchange for capital tout court. To the capitalist nothing is really free unless you can calculate how much it’s going to *not* cost.

Papp refused Moses’ offer: charging admissions would put Free Shakespeare in the same category as a highly capitalized and speculative Broadway production, or a highly capitalized and speculative cultural institution like Barnum’s American Museum a century earlier; it was a sure road to financial dependency:

I am trying to build our theater on the bedrock of municipal and civic responsibility—not on the quicksands of show business economics.

A month later Papp was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee to answer charges of Communism—or, as Papp came to believe, of communist thinking: it's likely that the two, the thinking and the Party, were related in the Committee's mind and in Robert Moses'. The Myth of American Liberalism holds that McCarthyism was marginal to the American political process because ideologies that offer resistance to capital are themselves marginal. Liberals, left-of-center media, progressive academics, all those who “keep hunting for the *Zeitgeist* in order to submit to its command” were and are still in general agreement with the goals of McCarthyism; the only thing they dislike is its bumbling inefficiency:

The faculty's own screening methods are more effective than any loyalty oath. Fellow travelers, far more dangerous than admitted Communists, are kept out or kicked out by this screening.

Moses himself would later describe Papp as “an irresponsible Commie.” To a bureaucrat that's always the worst kind.

At the HUAC hearing the Chair tried to get Papp to admit that Free Shakespeare was “produce[d] and supervise[d] for the purpose of influencing sympathy toward communism;” Papp dodged, pretending that the question concerned Communism, not communism: the plays’ content, not the style of production. Staff Director Ahrens blew up:

There is no suggestion here... that Shakespeare was a Communist. That is ludicrous and absurd. That is the Commie line.

Ahrens was apparently trying to prevent the Chair from saying out loud that free theater performances in themselves smacked of Communism. New York City's community spirit was remarkably resilient in the face of postwar capitalist *Gleichschaltung*; High Culture at low cost played an important role in progres-

sive politics. The following year, when Moses took matters in his own hands and tried to smear Papp, the “Battle of Central Park” turned into a public relations catastrophe for Moses. The legendary PR man Edward Bernays, a man who knew the winds of public opinion, sent in a large contribution to Papp’s project, saying he

felt [Papp] was setting a sound precedent that might be followed by others in New York as well as in other cities throughout the United States.

When Moses offered to fund Papp’s theater if Papp would charge admission and turn over 10% to the Parks Department, Papp took Moses to court, and a disbelieving judge (not caring to be wise to the contradictory forms of capitalization), noted the capriciousness of a Governmental agency trying to bully and bribe a not-for-profit into charging admission in the public interest.

24 Gesellschaft 1, Visitors 0.

Or is it *Hierarchy 0, Visitors 1*? Americans have a special relationship to social hierarchies because they have an extra-special relationship to money. The framers of the American Constitution wanted to preserve economic relations while hoping to discard the European system of feudal relations that framed them, as if the whole system of extra-economic coercion that undergirds economic exchanges could be made to disappear. The result is that, while social hierarchies in most countries today live on the rarefied oxygen of capital, they survive in divergent ways. In Europe the traditional feudal hierarchies have not disappeared, they’ve reconfigured themselves in relation to capital. On the American side a certain Professor Veblen’s shocked—shocked!—to discover that those who live off capital, not labor, use art and culture to establish their superiority over us mere gruntsproducers. In either case the conscious product is the nurtured fantasy that in a classless society like the Kulturati or the Kwakwaka’wakw exchanges of symbolic capital are independent

of those other exchanges that take place in an economy subservient to capital. Walk like a gangsta, work like a slave.

In 1935 the composer Hanns Eisler wrote from America to his friend Bertolt Brecht:

This country is really magnificent, because here there is a great lack of superstructure. Here class opposes class in an extremely naked way.

Call it what you will: American Culture displays more nakedly than elsewhere its economic and class dynamics. This was obvious to Henry James, and never more obvious than in 1935, when progressive intellectuals inside and outside of Government attempted social-democratic systems of social engineering in all fields, including the field of Culture. The Federal Art Project section of the Works Project Administration was founded that same year, a “vast and unparalleled... propaganda machine” as it was accurately called by conservatives, though not in a good way. The liberal myth holds that conservative politicians oppose Culture per se, or at least Government support for the Arts. When conservatives oppose certain forms of Culture it’s usually for the same reasons progressives oppose other forms: in either case they oppose the particular concept of Culture being promoted and the diversion of Government funds to prop up a Culture of the wrong kind through the wrong kinds of channels, for the wrong purpose and for the wrong people. To the progressive social planners and theorists of the mid-twentieth century those wrong people were the right people because they lived under the stigma of being, among other things, uncultured. It was widely understood, and often articulated, that by making parks and museums accessible to all without respect to their imputed qualifications, the State could remove the stigma that discouraged the stigmatized from participating in society as equals. If capital is indeed embodied in each of us through access to Culture, then full and open access to museums is just another form of capital redistribution.

Nice try. In the ‘sixties the Social Welfare movement ran up against three deeply embedded features of America’s dominant culture: the “laws” of embodied capital, the “laws” of economic motion, and racial discrimination, no law required. As a nation, America is founded on the principle that all men are endowed (as in “embodied”) with the urge (as in “motion”) to pursue Happiness by any means. This is the urge that, according to Adam Smith, drives us inevitably toward

bettering our condition, a desire which, though generally calm and dispassionate comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave.

Which would exclude all those who, from some genetic or geographic abnormality or other, are not so driven. If all citizens are endowed with Certain Inalienable Rights, then non-citizen are not, phenomenologically speaking. The non-citizens’ access to Culture (at least the Culture appropriated by an earlier generation of Americans) is conditional on their desire to participate fully in “a democracy in cupidity rather than a democracy in fraternity.”

In 1942 Gunnar Myrdal noted among African Americans a type he called the Exaggerated American. Blacks had, too, an unquenchable desire to own a tee-vee and drive a big car or, for that matter, to vote or get an education or visit a museum like everybody else. The next three decades were to demonstrate how unquenchable that was, while their opponents argued that this particular unquench was rooted, not in a calm and dispassionate desire but in a “tangle of pathology,” “a frenzy of arrogance and nihilism.” What invading Hyde Park had been to Arnold, the sit-ins, marches and blackout looting were to the liberal elite: not directed at political or economic goals, but embodied in the psyches of the protagonists themselves. Just as any worker visiting the Met in overalls in 1897 must be there with Intent to Defecate so, too, any citizen driven to the Met by an overdose of

melanin must have other goals than looking at Art. The argument that the visitor, black or working-class, *should* have different goals was endorsed by self-appointed progressives who, seeing how museums promoted various -isms like sexism, racism and commodityfetishism, took upon themselves to be the guardians of the revolutionary purity of others. I've never understood the difference between a white supremacist claiming black folks don't belong in a museum because the museum's culture is superior to theirs, and a right-on radical claiming black folks don't belong in the museum because they're superior to *it*: in either case the drive for political and economic enfranchisement is sidelined into questions of social, cultural, and biological behavior in a malicious duplication of Arnold's strategy. In 1967 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, future adviser to Richard Nixon on domestic policy and future Senator from New York, proposed a distortion of his own: "An era of bad manners is almost certainly begun." Well, pardon my pinkie...

26

At the Met the Era of Bad Manners began in January, 1969 with the opening of the show *Harlem on my Mind*; perhaps it began a few days earlier: just before the show opened to the general public the Museum discovered the letter *H* traced over a number of canvases. Whether this was done out of resentment at the anticipated show, and where the resentment came from, is not clear; there was plenty of resentment from inside the Museum: from whites as well as blacks. After the launching of the War on Poverty in 1964 and the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965 there was money to be made in being inclusive, the kind of inclusiveness occasionally called Jobs for White Folks in black communities and Jobs for Well-You-Know by whites. Like many outreach programs of the 'sixties and 'seventies, *Harlem on My Mind* went beyond accessibility. Its flashy multimedia, blow-ups and piped sound were a bit of overkill, as if an extra effort were needed to convince the folks in Harlem to come down

the Avenue. Not that they needed convincing: the galleries were packed, the catalog sold in the thousands in an extra-cheap paperback edition. Black attendance was not merely high, it was also remarkably tilted toward the black working class. Some resentment of the show came from middle-class black artists and community leaders; a good deal more came from Museum Trustees. “Punch” Sulzberger, Publisher and owner of the *New York Times*, had joined the Met’s Board of Trustees in 1968; from the beginning of the Civil Rights movement the *Times* had “cultivated a rising hysteria” against African Americans. In the following decades it would refine this hysteria as a tool of New York City politics and an instrument for the Sulzbergers’ real-estate speculations. From the outset the *Times* “dictate[d] how the exhibition w[ould] be represented,” playing up the theme of black resentment, manipulating class and cultural divisions within the black community, along with a steady diet of *NAS* (Negro Atrocity Stories): even Saddam Hussein was brought into the mix. The knock-out punch came with a passage in the exhibition catalog in which a high-school senior tried to address the issue of black antisemitism—the passage itself was lifted without attribution from a book by Moynihan and Nathan Glazer. One might have argued, since the catalog was aimed at the anticipated black visitors, that the mention of black antisemitism was an integral part of that “creative confrontation” the curator hoped to encourage. Blacks, too, had reason to object both to Moynihan’s scholarly baiting and its reiteration in the catalog; but as Hoving surmised, Sulzberger and others had bigger catfish to fry. The liberal Mayor and his City Council threatened to cut off funds for the Met if the catalog was not withdrawn, the same brand of liberals that would go ballistic years later, when a conservative mayor threatened to cut funds to a local museum to punish it for a controversial display. Those funds the City Council wanted withdrawn to punish the Met for its inclusiveness were the same funds that were meant to encourage access for workers and the poor.

Soon afterwards the Museum Trustees started to discuss the feasibility of charging for admissions. Of course the Trustees had wanted to do just that for a hundred years, but a fundamental principle of museums and Government had stood in their way. The modern concept of the Museum dates back to the French Revolution and a little bit earlier, when the Triumphant (or soon-to-be Triumphant) Classes defined the Museum as a public service in order to distinguish the collections opened up to the People from the private collections of monarchs and millionaires:

These collections... whose only purpose was to flatter the vanity and serve the ambition of a few, will from now on be for the use of all.

In 1880, at the opening ceremonies for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Joseph Choate still echoed the blazing rhetoric of the Jacobins:

If art were still, as it once was, the mere plaything of courts and palaces, ministering to the pride and luxury of the rich and the voluptuous, there might be some force in the objection. But now that art belongs to the people... if it be within the real objects of government to promote the general welfare then no expenditure could be more wise, more profitable, more truly republican.

The Met, like all museums in the Enlightenment definition, was a social policy initiative. *Harlem on My Mind* was one of many projects in the War on Poverty that, from 1965 on, had been promoted through various federally funded programs; it imploded in the same manner as other projects of its kind. Poverty programs were meant to empower the poor without empowering them to the point of threatening the local power structure; ideally they should “raise up” the poor without empowering them at all—wasn’t that the purpose of Culture according to Arnold? In the nineteen-seventies an artist friend of mine designed a sculpture that fit exactly into the back of a flatbed truck. In case of riot, drive pre-loaded art experience to the ghetto, unload, and watch the looting end as the savage breast gets soothed: that’s

the extent of a liberal's grasp of Art as social policy. Hoving's mistake was to bring the savage breasts to the Museum instead of the other way around. Museum attendance—the physical presence of the wrong kind of people inside its walls—was the problem, and the *Times* reacted as a very different type of New Yorkers react when their turf is invaded: by waving the bloody tallis—better than stoning a school bus or burning crosses. “Harlem off Our Mind?” a *Times* editorial helpfully suggested. “Pay what you wish” was the Trustee’s response.

Certain trustees started to pressure [Hoving] to institute a mandatory admissions charge... The man who saved the day was Henry Ittleson, an honorary trustee... He called it “pay what you wish but you must pay something.” He urged us to set up cash registers.... and to play to the “embarrassment factor....”

Is there for honest poverty that hangs his head an’ a’ that? The Trustees certainly hoped so. In 1965, in his trend-setting report on the black family, Moynihan had shared his concern that “the present tangle of pathologies is capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world.” Even so, Whiteworld (the power structure, not the theme park) was happy to assist. The Parks Commissioner, a patrician named August Heckscher II, was happy to pass on to the Museum the task of ensuring the underserved would be properly served, just in case they should decide to serve themselves. The Trustees decided that “Any visitor who objected should be allowed in free,” and Heckscher insisted the policy be clearly posted. Then the Museum posted a sign reading, “Pay what you wish but you must pay something,” strong emphasis on *must*. Later, when a new Parks Commissioner complained that people were not being let in for free after all, the Director, Thomas Hoving, replied that charging a penny was part of the original agreement.

And what agreement was that? There was no agreement, save for an informal exchange of letters and (possibly) a draft of an agreement. No Mayor’s okay, no hearings before the City Council, no questions asked, not even the most basic one of all: “What

is your justification for depriving New Yorkers of a right they've enjoyed for a hundred years?" The answer, of course, was going to be: "We need the money," because the Museum had been going to need the money since January 17, 1870. Only after the admission fee had been approved did the Trustees figure out what they'd been going to need the money for to begin with: now they launched a costly building campaign to extend the Museum into Central Park, putting Heckscher between a black and a hard place. Hadn't he just approved the admissions fee because the Museum needed the money? And if not, why had he approved it in the first place? The liberal elites now poured out their outrage—not at the admissions policy, but at the potential desecration of "their" park. This is the kind of lose-lose situation liberals love: by publicly standing up against the expansion as a *fait accompli*, Heckscher and the White Folks (the political alliance, not the rock band) could quietly acquiesce to the admission fee, the real *fait accompli*. A sadist is someone who beats up on his partner to avoid sex, which he fears while pretending to want it; a liberal is someone who beats up on the rich to avoid helping the poor, whom he hates as much as the rich do. It would take forty-two years before the issue of free admissions was brought up in court, only to be thrown out again.

28

This is where the Winkwink Clause of the US Constitution comes in. According to the Winkwink Clause, power lies with whoever's in a position to ignore the Law: "You can't legislate morality;" "We owe an obligation to the laws, but a higher one to the communities in which we live." Ignoring laws is part and parcel of our Constitution, enshrined in the division of powers between Federal, State and Local Government, and in the judicial separation of Civil Society from Economic Society. Call it the Andrew Jackson Clause, after a US president who once explained that if the Supreme Court wants to go around making rules then the Supreme Court should grab a gun and enforce

them. It's the social norms that determine the Law, and not the other way around. By 1970 the Winkwink Clause (known also as the Ku Klux Clause) was under pressure as African Americans and others increasingly demanded that their rights as equal citizens be enforced and not merely acknowledged. Of course the Federal Government preferred the carrot to the stick: reallocation of resources against enforcement of laws which the Feds themselves were powerless to enforce; but as incentives came trickling down from Washington they met increased resistance from Whiteworld, which derived its mandate from its own ability to monopolize and redistribute resources and its considerable ability to wield or not the stick. Whiteworld's response was to redefine the meaning of the War on Poverty itself.

Social theorists grade the allocation of government resources between the twin poles of Entitlement and Privilege. *Entitlement*: a service or right that's guaranteed to all, like the right to be safe in one's house or the right to frequent a public space. *Privilege*: a right or service that's allocated to those who've earned it by their own unique experience, like the right to a veteran's pension. In the segregated South the Civil Rights Movement struggled to define sitting at a lunch counter as an entitlement; North and South, the reactionaries fought to turn entitlements like visiting a restaurant or a museum into privileges: their weapon was economic hierarchies.

It's a feature of structural racism (a definition, really), that ethnicity is so closely bound with patterns of economic and cultural stratification that discrimination becomes invisible to those who practice it. In full flight from the common insinuation that all Jews are rich and all the rich are Jews, the Trustees had turned to the newly-minted fantasy that "all blacks were poor and that all poor people were black." Under the "New Genteel Racism," visitors to the Met would never be humiliated because of their

skin color, only their economic condition, winkwink. Don't call them *Negroes*, My Dear: call them the *Underclass*.

29

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights claims for all people the “right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community,” which makes of culture an entitlement, except whenever a community decides to define itself according to exclusionary criteria, meaning almost always: culture then becomes a privilege of nation, ethnicity, race, or economic domination. White French citizens claim to be entitled to French Culture in a way others are not, which turns the question back to what “French” means in the first place. Just as Wagner’s music was defined as “forever inaccessible to the truly Jewish,” so, too, Culture to the truly penniless at the turn of the twenty-first century.

From the early ‘fifties on, American sociologists were in the business of presenting as observable, quantifiable social facts certain behaviors that were merely forms of coercion and regulation, and whose only legitimacy derived from the fact that they were described and legitimized by the sociologists themselves, like the fantasy that minorities do not participate in Culture:

The lower-class Negro, Italian, Jew, or Slav, is permitted [sic] to approach the American middle class norm [of culture] more or less at his own mobility pace.

The trick, as always in Functionalist Theory, is to drop any acknowledgment of coercion, economic or other: “Culture Happens;” “Certain predefined social groups appear to be structurally resistant to paid museum admissions.” Forms of behavior are legitimized or rejected in the name of supposedly pre-established social norms, or “trends,” as the *New York Times* likes to call them—norms that our fearless Zeitgeist hunters have just pulled out of their class. In 1969 Moynihan (by now a Presidential adviser on Urban Affairs) worried about

the increasing introduction into politics and government of ideas

originating in the social sciences which promise to bring about social change through the manipulation of what might be termed the hidden processes of society...

That's a case of the kettle calling the pot white. By the early 'sixties, in the face of an escalating social and political crisis, description had become an aggressive form of social prescription.

Back in 1762 Jean-Jacques Rousseau worried that in order for a people to become virtuous they must already hold the values that would make them virtuous to begin with. America's media have never had a problem defining for us all the values we supposedly share. In 1950 David Riesman, the sociologist, claimed that the mass media "do more to encourage other-directed tolerance than to preserve inner-directed indignation." By the late 'sixties the promotion of values (what the *New York Times* calls the "reporting of trends") had turned into an orgy of other-directed indignation. The *Times* was a daily collage of scare articles and photographs (possibly doctored) of crack-smoking blacks next to pictures of white folks buying cars and traipsing in the woods.

30

There is a common social process called *Stigmatization*. Its effect is to single out within specific settings those who do not meet implicit norms of behavior, or dress, or bodily appearance. Stigmatization operates, not by defining the "Other" but by defining the Same to which the Other happens not to conform. This is probably why academic radicals love to prattle about Otherness: it's a way of avoiding the real social processes happening under their noses. The trick is to define entitlements as norms and let the Invisible Hand take it from there—only don't call it "discrimination," call it "norming out." Never discriminate against anyone because they're black or poor or female or foreign: it's not nice, and sometimes it's illegal. Just find interesting, perfectly legal ways to embarrass or marginalize those who don't meet our universal norms of behavior which, as every *Times* reader knows, consist in being rich, white, and culturally savvy. The norm is

buying your first condo, going to the right restaurants and visiting the right shows; or paying your admission fee at the museum. On the other side are the “People Who Want Free Stuff,” as a recent presidential candidate called them: free money, free care, free culture. Is it a coincidence that one of that selfsame candidate’s biggest funders sits on the Met’s Board of Trustees? From the Met to the Welfare office, the techniques used to discourage the Underworthy are remarkably similar. As one backwoods lawyer put it, back in the ‘sixties, “There’s no crime in Georgia against intimidating colored people.” Or “nudging” them in Manhattan, for that matter. In Europe, America and elsewhere it’s not a crime to intimidate people who are poor, or look poor, or might belong to a group that’s known to be poor. It’s not a crime to set up a situation where the hip and privileged get in free while others pay. What better way to make the Underclass feel undeserving than to leave them in suspense as to how much they’re going to have to pay? What better way to reinforce economic insecurity, than to reinforce uncertainty? What better form of bullying than the arbitrariness of punishment or reward? Knowing that the most crushing psychological burden on poor parents is the sense of a failure to provide, what better way to reinforce that feeling than by making them wait on line, uncertain whether they’ll be asked to pay more than they can afford? If the Met were trying to keep out white men there’d be penis-measuring devices at every door.

Turns out the Underclass don’t go to museums because they can’t afford to or don’t want to or don’t feel welcome; turns out they don’t go because the “Culture of Poverty” prevents them from achieving their full potential. It’s the same culture that keep poor folks waiting around for someone to hand out tickets to the Met instead of taking the initiative and getting a job so they can go look at Leonards—whatever happened to Personal Responsibility in Museum-going? It’s the same lack of initiative

that keeps them from figuring out admissions are free. The effects of racism and poverty are read as their own cause.

From its inception in the late eighteenth century into the middle of the twentieth the museum's mission was educational in the old Latin and the German sense of the word: *ex-ducere, erziehen*: to lead out and upward. One became a better welder or a better designer, a better worker and a better citizen, a finer soul, even, by going to the museum. Today at the capitalist museum you do not become anything at all because you are everything already, and your willingness to wait on line and pay is proof of your innate worth, which can be traded for the innate worth of money as the objective criterion of all value.

The hard-to-die dream of Capital says that the “Commodity” is a “fetish;” that the “Commodity” need only snap its fingers to bring in its adoring subject. In fact the fetish-aspect of a given commodity (an artwork in a museum, for instance) is activated by specific social dynamics that originate in the specific social relations determined by the specific organization of a specific visitor to any one specific museum, not by some kind of magic:

The consumer is really worshiping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket... He has literally created the success [of the performance or artwork] which he reifies [as the exchange-value of the ticket] and accepts as an objective criterion without seeing himself in it. But he has not created it by liking the concert, but rather by buying the ticket.

Commodities are like your first puff of marijuana: you've got to believe if you want to get high, except with commodities it's the same puff over and over again. That's a lot of work and money for the capitalist—neither of which turn up on his balance sheet.

Till Eulenspiegel is hired by a rich merchant to paint a family portrait. After many months the merchant demands to see it. Till announces he will unveil the painting before the whole family, and it's a magic painting: everyone will see themselves exactly as they are, except the fools, who will see nothing. Of course

the canvas is blank. Everyone extols the painter's skills in showing them exactly as they are: their position among their peers depends on seeing what everybody else sees, which happens to be nothing. Since all laws reduce themselves to the eternal, unmovable and impersonal laws of capital, capital itself dispenses each of its devotees from seeing himself in a relationship with others—a narcissistic “refusal of friendship and intercourse.” Just as Confession in the Church dispenses you from judgment on your own moral worth (let alone the judgment of your peers), so, too, with the appreciation of Art: to confess your allegiance to the power of cash (be it one penny or a hundred) is at once to abdicate your right to interact critically with works of art, and to repudiate the Demon Community. *Do You Accept Credit Cards as your Personal Savior?*

32

IV] WAG THE DEGAS

*They are more ignorant than the poor
tho they pride themselves with that accent. And
move easily in fake robes of egalitarianism. Meaning
I will fuck you even if you don't like art.*

— Amiri Baraka

On January 26, 2013 a family of three among the poorest of the poor, along with an accompanying social worker, were ejected from the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. The group was escorted to the exit after being told there had been complaints from other visitors about their smell. Later on, when asked to justify themselves, the guards, the Museum administrators and finally the French Minister of Culture and Communications explained that the twelve-year old in the group had defecated in his pants. It's an accusation two steps beyond the ludicrous, but any other explanation would have brought out that the family was singled out for their appearance—most likely the color of their skin.

French Law bans the mention of race or ethnicity: the suggestion that certain people smell a certain way might have been turned against whoever first verbalized it as a criminal offense. Structural racism: in France it's not just a bad idea—it's the law.

Was this a minor lapse, a mere setback in the rise of the global museum? Free-market theorists like to fantasize that discrimination and market efficiency are incompatible: to paraphrase the free-market economist Gary ("The Human Capital") Becker, "Every time I discriminate... I'm losing." Or is it instead that the museum today houses several museums in one, with interests at once competing and interdependent? Are the "modes of adaptation to the economic order" inevitable at the admissions desk or elsewhere? Can the modern-day museum, like Capitalism itself, survive without its interlocking systems of coercion masking as incentive? The French Minister explained that by throwing out the family, Museum personnel had "preserved the opportunity for even these people to visit the museum in more dignified conditions." This was in line with the stated program of the governing Socialist Party, which is implicit in the social programs of most overdeveloped societies: the State promotes the personal responsibility of each individual, it mediates between the individual will and the General Will; and since all motion, social or individual, originates in economics, the role of the State is to promote those activities whose use-value lies strictly within the range of the economic:

The legislator, unable to use force, nor reason, must of necessity turn to an authority of another type that can direct without force and persuade without reasoning.

33

Neither force nor reason—well, how about a little force? Going to the museum isn't about enjoying Art any more, it's about enforcing a cultural consensus. It's not the guards you need to watch out for, it's the exaggerated capitalists on the lookout for moochers and free riders; it's those they used to call "genteel,"

still clinging to the illusion that Culture will keep them from slipping back into the muck. You see them in Paris, Budapest, New York, ranting at those who block their view of a painting, waiting in long lines in front of the museum as if it were a job interview, except there are no jobs. Economic insecurity and cultural insecurity go hand-in-hand.

There have been times, there will be times again, when you go visit a museum, or you apply for unemployment and you're told, Why of course you should have these things, it's only *natural*. There was a time, as there will be still, when the "Unhappy Consciousness" could find a reasonable degree of happiness, along with cheap rents and plenty of time to think, in whatever Bohemia was at hand: kick up, suck down, and keep the Man at bay. Now there's a new breed of artists with no time to lose—hard, ferocious, viciously intolerant: hipster terrorists, hashishim of capital yearning for the Paradise of standardization, polishing the image of themselves that they look forward to looking back upon some day: the self as a commodity future.

34

In 1995 the sociologist Herbert Gans warned that the War against the Underclass would gradually engulf its most eager foot-soldiers, the petite bourgeoisie. Back in the 'sixties the small measures taken to ensure for all Americans a decent standard of living had given the lower working class better bargaining power. Given a choice between starvation wages and going on welfare or getting food stamps, workers chose welfare—what were they, stupid? As it got harder to hire folks for nothing, the bosses realized they'd have to raise wages. For Carey and Lincoln and the Old Republicans, raising the workers by raising their wages, their level of culture and their material comfort was the promise of America. Now, instead, the bosses fought the rising costs of labor with economic theory and economic policy; they fought against the rising expectations of the poor with social policy and Culture—the two are interchangeable.

Talk of how ignorant armies clash by night: today, instead of Class Struggle plain as a board game, it's a War of Position to make Gramsci drool, a *dispositif* to turn Foucault hard. Today the social struggles turn on a set of ideological positions whose ultimate convergence on a discernible *episteme* is never clear. The meanings of their own actions are no more clear to the actors than to others; what the various positions have in common, though, is the belief that power comes from one's choice of social norms—in other terms, that Value comes from values. The hipsters are one instance; so was Occupy Wall Street, the Valmy of values.

If I had to choose a *Guide for the Perplexed* in all of this it would be Max Weber's *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, a book that ranks as the Bible and Popol Vuh of Modernist Capitalism, only a lot more simplistic than the first and a lot less entertaining than the second. It can't be helped, democracy is dead: the “nonpartisan technocratic managers” have taken over, thanks to their ruthless, unfailing efficiency. (Is this a Dilbert cartoon?) And because they're so efficient, the bureaucrats achieve Authority. To quote the current bible of the International Committee on Museums, the global association of museum professionals,

We can define the specificity of communication as practiced by museums on two points: 1) it is most often unilateral, that is, without the possibility of reply from the receiving public, whose extreme passivity was rightly emphasized by McLuhan and Parker; 2)... So intense is [the museum's] communicative power that ethical responsibility in its use must be a primary concern of the museum worker.... It appears... that the real task of the museum is closer to transmission, understood as unilateral communication over time so that each person can assimilate the cultural knowledge which confirms his [*sic*] humanity and places him [*sic*] in society.

As that great art critic, Stendhal, might have put it, there are no frigid visitors, only inept museum personnel. And the more

inept, the more they flaunt their irresistible powers of seduction. As a quoteunquote critic for the *New York Times* put it:

[Walter] Benjamin, a genius, was wrong about one thing: the age of reproduction has not diminished the aura of the original object as he predicted. The aura has increased.

I wouldn't brag about this. Benjamin's famous article questions Weber's original assertion that with the bureaucratization, standardization and rationalization of social institutions the aura of authority applied to leader and artworks is diminished. On the contrary, says Benjamin, the purely political need for continued enforcement of authority, moral and cultural, leads to regression of the ego functions and regression of Democracy, the ego-function of Society; in other terms, to general social infantilization of the kind the *Times* enthusiastically promotes. To which Adorno added that the aura is simply refunctioned as the fetishization of the commodity. Weber and the *New York Times* at least agree in this, that the future favors infantilization over autonomy. The *Times* is all for it.

35

In the days of Stalin a visit to the opera or museum was no longer a means of educating oneself or becoming a better worker as it had been earlier in most industrialized countries: it was a reward for good behavior, and good behavior consisted in being a good worker. Now as then, Art is not a form of unalienated labor, it's the reverse of labor: no longer an invitation to build the Realm of Freedom as it had been for Schiller and his followers right and left, but a reward for choosing the right values, like buying your first condo or hanging at the latest hip restaurant: not the manufacture of consent but the manufacture of lifestyles. Only as such is Art an education, since education itself in the overripe societies is little more than the formation of values, and first among them workplace discipline. Kant says the purpose of Education is to teach you to sit still and stare at a wall. Sounds like that Art Appreciation course you took in college, doesn't it?

In return, standardization of values demands the standardization of the museum experience. According to ICOM's ethic (and Stalin's), every museum offers only one possible interpretation: visitors are no more entrusted with deciding what they need to know than an assembly-line worker is entrusted with deciding what kind of car to build. The poet Osip Mandelshtam once got a gig to report on some museum outside Leningrad: he came back with an article about the bast shoes that visitors were made to wear—bad, bad poet! The history of museums is a long litany of mistaken interpretations by people who don't get it; so is the history of human progress.

36

That which concerned Rousseau, Kant, Marx, Kelsen, Habermas, Foucault—whether and how judgments of Value are also judgments of Truth—is a settled question for Capital; as Habermas points out, this means the capitalists have to spend a lot of time, effort, money and, yes, capital—cultural, symbolic or cash—to ensure that people count what's supposed to be counted, and not what's not. Money-Making? Perfect score. Dignity? Won't count toward your final grade. The more troubled the system (meaning, the more distrusted), the greater the waste. The System enters a downward spiral of delegitimation; economic coercion, that magical law of motion that spontaneously drives people to museums, needs more and more to be manufactured; a whole new scientific discipline emerges, Lysenkonomics, to instill the Imputed Cash Consciousness that makes people want to visit the museum. Non-economic coercion grows: waiting for admission is no longer a simple social transaction, it's like approaching the Lord of the Manor. Considering how much the Koch Brothers waste on elections to elect a Government that enforces this kind of thinking, a seat on the Met's Board of Trustees is a bargain.

Winning Arts and Minds: To Gilman, Art was something whose use-value as pleasure increased along with the number of visi-

tors. To the capitalist, Art is something whose exchange-value increases with the number of people who appear to be interested. Since the number of visitors must be increased in order to increase the illusion of the product's use-value there is a constant drumbeat to bring people to the museum, which in turn demands that more be invested than the visitors will ever pay back: museum admissions are the loss-leader in the speculative world of art. The Trustee's solution, as usual, is, to socialize costs through massive programs of indoctrination: government-supported programs to bring in the Underserved, for instance, or the college Art Appreciation courses sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation in the 'forties. Somebody's got to appreciate Art—you don't expect the Art to appreciate all by itself, do you?

Museum directors like to compare their admissions fees to those of rock concerts and sports events: "How much is a football fan willing to pay for his seat?" (And it's root, root, root for Team Renoir!) Arts coverage in the mass media is increasingly patterned on sports coverage, or those Nazi rallies where the visitor was encouraged (strongly) to pay out as much as he could in order to provide a quantifiable measure of enthusiasm: Triumph of the Consumer Will. A critical thinker in the art world today feels useless, mildly ridiculous and occasionally threatened, like that liberal who went to a Nazi rally with plans to raise his hand and ask a question of der Führer. In the capitalist Museum all value judgments are a threat because they are simultaneously judgments on the exchange-value of the artworks as defined by the museum, and judgments on the use-value of the viewers' own abilities, which the visitor is encouraged to believe are his own: judgments on the capital embodied in the visitor's ability to appreciate. Marx points out that capitalists have no use for art criticism, it only keeps the consumers from "enjoying themselves:" enjoying the use of their own perceptive functions as capital embodied—is that *jus utendi* or *jus fruendi*? 37

Some years ago a couple of culturologists pointed out the contradiction between screening out the undesirables and promoting a culture of consumption in museums. As museums integrated into the global economy, as their functions became more streamlined and efficient, the irrational impulse to screen and hassle visitors was going to recede; and in fact a number of American museums have recently turned or returned to free admissions. Why is it, then, that the more global a museum the less welcoming, the most insensitive to the visitor's needs, the least free in every sense of the word? Wasn't the point of transnational integration, in Culture as in finance, to smooth over national tensions, not to intensify them as we see happening across Europe? Isn't the historic function of capital to smooth out all the bad remnants of the past? Could it be that the world is round?

At its founding in 1870, the Met's stated mission was one of establishing and maintaining in said city a Museum and library of art, of encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts, and the application of arts to manufactures and practical life, of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and, to that end, of furnishing popular instruction and recreation.

In 2000, as a casual afterthought, the Trustees changed the Museum's Mission Statement to read:

The mission of The Metropolitan Museum of Art is to collect, preserve, study, exhibit, and stimulate appreciation for and advance knowledge of works of art that collectively represent the broadest spectrum of human achievement at the highest level of quality, all in the service of the public and in accordance with the highest professional standards.

With these words the Museum tossed all but the pretense of an educational mission. Its calling is now to grow the value of its capital investment to the "highest level of quality." Visitors aren't there for their own improvement, they're there to demonstrate the use-value of the artwork and hence enhance its exchange-value. Your admission fee is the "illusion of an ex-

change,” based on the naïve assumption that the exchange-value of a painting is proportionate to its use-value.

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This is where Baumol’s Dilemma comes in, also known as Baumol’s Disease, a. k. a. The Curse of Baumol, more accurately Return of the Falling Rate of Profit. You see, a cultural institution (a concert hall, for instance) has a built-in *structural* deficit. No matter how fast the institution grows, no matter how efficient, the performer can only play that many notes per second—except Lang Lang, maybe. That theory’s merely misapplied Marx, Baumol being the Böhm-Bawerk of Ballet. Marx’s original theory was in reply to Carey’s argument that the Law of Diminishing Returns was a good thing because it would make it necessary to raise wages in order to attract better, faster, more efficient workers, which in turn would force the other companies to raise wages, which would mean an eternal, overall improvement in worker’s wages, which would prevent Revolution—in his dreams, said Marx, who understood that the capitalist doesn’t treat workers as the owners of capital, symbolic, cultural or otherwise, but as capital itself: as the consumers, not the owners, of the product of their own labor. One does not *learn* something by going to the museum or watching tee-vee or reading the newspapers or surfing the web: one *becomes* a pair of eyeballs to be bought, sold or exchanged. It’s the difference between *owning* capital and *being* capital. I am Somebody? More like Something.

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The Falling Rate of Profit assumes two interdependent forms of pressure on profits: pressure to lower production costs (the cost of getting eyeballs into the Museum) causes and is caused by pressure to grow and compete. The Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art recently explained that “the average visitor costs us about \$45”—it’s called the dollar/experience ratio in the profession. The obvious solution is to close down the Museum and stick the art in a vault where it can spontaneously appreci-

ate. Instead the Met chooses to expand: to make itself accessible to the ever-increasing number of visitors in order to decrease its cost-per-unit. At the Guggenheim that's called the Vicious Ramp.

Of course the Met has been defining itself as being forced to expand since January 17, 1870. How very fortunate we are then, that in every age the Trustees know the business of expansion—just in case. How fortunate today, that the Board of Trustees is headed by a real-estate developer, as are many major museums in America; that New York City offers generous tax subsidies for cultural institutions, especially cultural institutions that, in order to survive, must rely on triple-tax free bonds, guaranteed by the State, that allow them to invest in luxury buildings that bring in enough income to expand into yet other buildings, since after all the buildings they've just built are now bustling with billionaires. How fortunate, then, that attendance has been soaring at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, since one such museum just recently defaulted on its bonds: bonds that had been approved by the Mayor of New York and the State Attorney General, based on wildly overstated expectations of soaring attendance.

The Global Museum is a shark: it has to keep moving or it dies. Recently the Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art announced that attendance had reached 6 million, up from 4.5 million five years previous, or down from two years previous, when the attendance was a “Whopping 6.28 M,” down from forty-five years earlier, when the “astronomical annual attendance” was 6,281,162. Fudging museum attendance figures is an old tradition at the Met: the place has been expanding to six million visitors for the past forty years. Most likely attendance has doubled since the late seventies, which means it’s been shrinking or standing still relative to the Museum’s size, which has more

than doubled. This is consistent with figures nationwide, which show a long-term decrease in museum attendance, even as the number of museums grows in order to meet a demand that was never there to begin with. It takes all the marketing, arm-twisting and infusions of cash for the museum just to stay in place; meanwhile the power drains slowly out of the IMA, the Ideological Market Apparatus.

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Legitimation Crisis: the Met and the whole global movement for culture are not in the business of creating demand, they're in the business of creating the illusion of demand. Like a shark in formaldehyde, they're only as alive as they make you think they are; but if somebody's fudging the numbers at the Met, who profits? And why would the *New York Times* and others tell us every day about the mobs and mobs and masses and crowds coming to the Museum, if it weren't true? Is the Metropolitan Museum of Art hiding weapons of mass construction?

Seven days a week, lines form in the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. There are lines waiting for the doors to open; lines beyond the door, waiting to pass through Security. There are lines waiting to buy their tickets and they're slower than usual as people figure out what they think they should pay. There are lines at the Visitor Services Desk, tour guides waiting to register while their group hovers in the Hall, next to those who've agreed to meet in the Great Hall or those on their way to the Gift Shop or the Bookstore—My, what a crowded museum. Then there are lines to get past the guards who check to see if you're wearing the sticker for which you've already waited in line after waiting in line to wait in line, and then you finally reach the galleries, and you're almost by yourself, just you and a few visitors and the guards and the art.

Move along folks, there's nothing to see...

This publication uses a modified version of the Century typeface designed by the New York typographer Theodore Low De Vinne. It is my tribute to the great American designers of the early twentieth century whose work the Metropolitan Museum of Art at one time supported and encouraged.

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