

To Sell or Not to Sell? A Transatlantic Debate

Christopher Bedford and Thomas Köhler in conversation with Dorothea Schöne

CONTEXT

The debate printed here is based on a panel discussion held after the annual Richard Schöne lecture organised by the Richard Schöne Society and Technische Universität Berlin in 2021. The subject of the lecture by Christopher Bedford on 1 November 2021 was “Structural Change in Art Museums”.

Protagonist institutions:

The Baltimore Museum of Art was founded in 1914. Christopher Bedford was the Dorothy Wagner Wallis director of the museum and the tenth director to lead the institution until June 2022, when he became director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The Baltimore Museum is renowned for its collections of nineteenth-century, modern and contemporary art. Christopher Bedford was appointed with a brief of reinventing a relevant museum experience for the twenty-first century while building upon the history of the venerable institution.

Berlinische Galerie was founded in 1975 by Berlin citizens as an arts association and became a foundation run by the city of Berlin in 1994. Its focus is the rich collection and research history of the arts in the city from the nineteenth century to the present. Dr Thomas Köhler managed the collections and exhibition programme at the Berlinische Galerie as deputy director from 2008 and was appointed director of the institution in 2010.

Kunsthau Dahlem in Berlin has been open since summer 2015 as an exhibition venue for postwar German modernism from East and West Germany. It is based in a building steeped in twentieth-century history and intermittently used by artists of variable political and conceptual persuasions ever since it was first created as the studio for the sculptor Arno Breker (1900-1991). Dr Dorothea Schöne has led the institution since 2014.

DS: There was much controversy in Baltimore around deaccessions. Most German museums cannot deaccession, in the US the Association of Museum Directors changed guidelines and allowed museums to do so. The BMA first deaccessioned and bought artworks in 2018 to diversify. In 2020 there was a second round, and the *Art Newspaper* spoke of a

“rapid, brutal, reparations-based change agenda”. *Washington Post* said “backfired stupendously”. Did the bold move ultimately pay off? Have you reached different audiences? Do you allow the new audiences to integrate their voices into the museum – do you hear their voices and how do they change the museum’s everyday business?

CB: The “endowment for the future” initiative centred around the sale of three paintings and was based on a desire to look with clear eyes at the way American institutions have functioned historically and to say that if we are serious about a change agenda, we are serious about taking care of equal and unfettered access to the institution for the public, ensuring that we are not simply articulating values but living by them. We need to look at every avenue available to us to restructure and reimagine, with nothing being off the table. In my view, and I believe it is shared by a growing group of younger museum directors, that the asset at our core, that is the collection, is itself the most emblematic aspect of our historical privilege and our historical bias. Like every other resource at our disposal, it should be available to us when we imagine ourselves in a different form. In addition to the V&A and myself coming under fire at the end of 2020 for this supposed reparatory act, in parallel with that you see artists and activists across the country railing against institutions that are not doing enough to establish a culture of equity and diversity and inclusion within, and for instance having trustees that have generated vast wealth by doing questionable things, by sustaining staff cultures that are not sufficiently diverse and/or abusive and toxic. I think it is really important to bear in mind that there were two big stories structuring museum life in the US in the latter part of the 2020/21. We were not under fire for reasons that some of our peers were – we were under fire for being too progressive. I stand behind the decision to sell the three paintings and I am happy to talk through the rationale behind selling them. I stand behind the logic and I stand behind the value-based decision-making. I am hopeful that AAMD will extend its latitude around deaccessioning paintings to allow institutions to fund direct care of the collections, and if that is extended in perpetuity, I think that – with that guardrail in place – will give museums who are cash-strapped on an annual basis the financial latitude to be more relevant and more present to their audiences, and if there is any incentive for that it is the progress we made in both growing and diversifying our audience. If you listen to people in a dialogical approach, you go to them, they come to you, and the playing field becomes intrinsically more equitable. I certainly have peers in the field who believe that the permanent collection is a sacred cow and should remain forever untouchable, I fundamentally disagree with that, I think it is an aspect of conservative intellectual habit, not a law, it is a guideline within a discipline that existed for a long time, and I think needs to be put under pressure precisely because artists and activist groups have pulled out and justly, our shortcomings as an institution, so we have to move fast and that requires resources, and one resource at our disposal is the collection.

DS: Do you also see – or don’t you see – that it could also set a dangerous precedent for the institution to sell works because it conveniently raises their endowment or just fits in a certain financial agenda that the board or the Association of Museum Directors agreed that under Covid, museums and institutions are in dire financial constraints had to re-

spond to that, but it also opened the floodgates for some who just conveniently sell major artworks. ... could add to that fashion?

CB: Yes, I think that there have to be guardrails in place that prevent museums from going too far, so the guardrail that was put in place was: you cannot sell objects to fund the direct care of the collection. I am of the position that that creates enough financial latitude that institutions can begin in parallel with that budget relief to fund programmes intended to make their internal structures be reflective of their mission and vision statements, and to open up the museum's doors to a broader public through access-based programmes. I do believe in the guardrails. I'll also say that: what is more calamitous – a museum selling a painting or sinking into a condition of public irrelevance and internal inequity as a result of doing nothing? It has been amply demonstrated to us, that museums are not doing the good work at the moment, and so the structure is not working. I think it is incumbent upon museum leaders to be brave, be bold, to analyse what we're not doing and try to find a means of achieving a new future – and that does require money.

DS: You gave me a good point, that of being irrelevant to the public, and I have a question I would like to ask both of you. At the end of the day, if we just abide these two keywords “increasing accessibility” and “equality”, do we still remain just a museum, or does the change of the audience and the need for structural change demand more from us than “just being a museum”?

TK: To ensure museum work, if it's necessary to sell art to ensure a museum works, it's wrong, in my eyes. The system is completely wrong. I have to say if the difference will kind of change between the US and Germany, ... when I was working at the Whitney I was really impressed by the powerful museum there, like the board of trustees, like Coca Cola, I thought, my God, this is so impressive, what they can do is amazing, what they get to buy, what they get to build, wow. I said, that's fascinating, I want to stay! But meanwhile I grew older and in line with that I found that this culture based on private money and on the grace of private money-givers is completely wrong. If you have to sell a work of art to open your museum that's really really bad, and actually, Dorothea, I checked the museum law in Berlin, and I could sell – I was surprised when I found out, it says if the board agrees we can sell. But I do think that they meant it differently, to give works away to eliminate redundancy. I only found out when preparing for this discussion – I could. But I would think it's completely wrong, it's a public museum and the public money has to be used to finance the museum as a communication platform. And I don't want to give anything away to ensure that an outreach curator can actually work. That's my main idea, and it's probably bad to criticize the US system, but I think it's a very inhuman way. Talking about pay equity sounds so weird, because we have a system where everybody gets the same, women and men – I think there is a way to go for American museums. It's probably very arrogant to say that but I think we are on a good way here.

CB: I agree with almost everything that you said so far, Thomas. The American system is a benefit and a burden and it's one that we exist within, and when it works it works extraordinarily well and when it doesn't, you encounter – not insurmountable obstacles but enormous challenges. We receive pretty de minimis support from the state of Maryland, we receive pretty de minimis support from the city of Baltimore in a scheme of our annual operating budget they give generous allocations but only taking a small bite out of our 20 million a year annual operating budget, so we have to scratch and claw through individuals, foundations, corporations, and possibly our board of trustees to make up the difference. And one of the reasons to – which I think is really fascinating – something I probably would not have ... had you not made your comment, one of the reasons to emphasize the endowment growth is precisely to liberate a museum creatively from any constraints. Whereas museums in Germany rely on the government to provide subsidy, which is fabulous, museums in this country rely on foundations, individuals, corporations, and primarily endowments. So one goal that we have set for ourselves, if we have an endowment of 400 million dollars, that would spin off twenty million dollars a year, meaning that none of that fundraising would be necessary, and the curators working within the institution would have pure creative liberty, without any reliance on any external forces including advocacy from the board of trustees. So in a certain sense, what I am intending to do though having the endowment is provide for something equivalent to the state support that you enjoy within the context of Germany as a country, but that kind of sustained support that removes all fundraising burden from the institution is very unlikely to come from federal, state, or city-based government support, it is either beyond the reach of those agencies or beyond the appetite of those agencies to do it, so we are forced into a position where we have to look for other sources on an annual basis, and this is probably quite foreign to you, I feel that my job here as director of the BMA is split between two points of focus, a uniquely creative vision to drive the programme of the institution and the money to support it, and I would say that that second point about the money to support it accounts for substantially more than half of my time.

TK: I just wanted to be provocative...

CB: Yes.. we don't have this conversation in this country at all, but it's great, it's fabulous. I think we don't have that conversation within the context of American institutions because the idea that such an infusion of governmental money into our institutions is so remote as a possibility that nobody even really entertains it. But it's a really good prompt for me to hear.

DS: This is precisely why we wanted the two of you to start a conversation,

Audience question: I am not sure but I think that most of the painting the BMA sold in 2018 were donations. Is that correct, and was it a problem for donors? Are you concerned that donors might refrain from donating, or if not, are you limited by this fact that you can only sell what the museum bought itself with its own funds?

CB: Fabulous question – of the paintings that were sold in 2018, all of them were completely unrestricted by deed of gift, meaning that we analysed the way they entered the collection, through purchase or by individual gift, to ensure that we were within our legal boundaries to sell. In each case, we were, and we had acquiescence by numerous lawyers and we were able to proceed with the sale. They were not all donated, some of them were partial gift, partial purchase, and some of them were direct purchase. There was great variance within the group. Per your second point about would this deter future donors from giving their work, we have absolutely not seen that. In fact, we have seen an uptick in donations, particularly in female-identifying artists and African-American artists as a consequence of the aggressiveness of our value-based vision for the institution. Finally, I would say, if a person feels uncomfortable about the idea of giving a work and the possibility of sale, there is always the option of a restricted gift which would mean that the museum could never sell the work. We have accepted significant collections on that basis in the recent past. For instance, when John Waters decided to give his collection, one of the conditions was that it can never be sold, so there is a way to negotiate that.