
Cultural Daily

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Brooklyn Museum: 100 Million Reasons to Protest

Robin Grearson · Wednesday, November 11th, 2015

I was included in some email threads last week that were helping to shape what became a [petition](#) to the Brooklyn Museum and its new director, [Anne Pasternak](#). These conversations opened out to include several community groups who also oppose an upcoming [real estate summit](#) that has rented event space from the Museum. The effort has strong support from past and future Brooklyn Museum artists.

The central issue is that commercial and residential displacement is occurring in Brooklyn at a traumatizing pace, and petitioners feel the event is a betrayal of the Museum's community-service mission. The Museum is located in a city-owned building and its power, lights and heat are paid for by New York City. The Museum has rented space to real-estate companies for events in the past, but, lately, more and more residents are paying attention and have begun speaking out against the practice, and petitioners are hoping that the Museum's new director will be receptive to requests for change.

Pasternak responded quickly. The artists' and writers' petition began circulating on November 6 (and currently has more than 800 signatures), and on November 8, Pasternak posted (on the [Museum's Tumblr](#)) a list of the ways she is addressing artists' concerns. Pasternak's prompt reply and willingness to grant artists' requests exposes the petition's key weakness: It spotlights important issues and does solid work to make artists visible as a passionate and cohesive group—but it asks too little.

What do I mean? I mean that money talks. I mean at the end of 2003, Brooklyn Museum's net assets (according to its IRS Form 990) were \$176,498,511. At the end of 2013, net assets had grown to \$270,878,003—an increase of \$100 million.

I mean the Brooklyn Museum Artists' Ball, the museum's "biggest annual fundraising event celebrating the borough's contributions to the arts," recorded gross receipts of \$1,059,506 in 2013—for the single event.

I mean that if you would like to support the museum and find yourself browsing the Brooklyn Museum website seeking information about renting or otherwise sponsoring space, you can browse the facilities-rental page, the corporate support page, a film & photo shoots page. Each of these sections helpfully provides a name, phone number and email contact for a staff member who will provide more information about your request. Events contributed \$205,394 to museum revenues in 2013.

If, however, you are an artist trying to navigate the Brooklyn Museum website, daring to wonder how, perhaps, to fulfill a dream to someday show your work there, you will find the following message, buried most of the way down the museum’s FAQ page:

I’m an artist. How can I let you know about my work?

Due to current demands on staffing, we’re not able to accept and review artist submissions at this time. (Note: Salaries and wages at the Museum totaled \$14,914,345 in 2013 (excluding officers, executives and key employees), an increase of \$3.5 million over 2003’s \$11,432,542.)

Commoditized

The premier category of support at the Museum is the [Director’s Circle](#), which invites donors to “enjoy evenings with artists in their studios, private collection tours, artist dinners, receptions hosted by influential members of the arts community, and much more.” Several levels of membership and engagement with the Museum (and its artists) include “Trailblazers,” “Visionaries,” Innovators,” “Leaders,” and “Influencers” (among others). Memberships that include access to “artist conversations” start at the “Influencer” level, which costs \$5,000 per year.



Exterior of the Brooklyn Museum.

Brooklyn Museum photograph by JongHeon Martin Kim

Of course Brooklyn developers want to hold their event at the Brooklyn Museum! But it’s not just because of the grandeur of the Beaux Arts Court. What petitioners need to understand is that cultural institutions are *natural* locations for these events because a symbiosis exists between real estate developers and the institutions. A museum needs donors with money who care about culture,

and the real estate industry wants these institutions to succeed and thrive. (Although this has nothing to do with artists.) Real estate developers are invested in supporting institutional culture not just to market properties today—but to assure buyers that their investment in Brooklyn will be profitable (**read: safe**) over the long-term.

And, over the last decade, the Brooklyn Museum has been a \$100 million beneficiary of developers' gentrification of Brooklyn. Through its marketing efforts to attract "Innovators" and others, the Museum has been actively commodifying the creators of Brooklyn's culture. Hosting real estate conferences are just one way that these synergies are exposed. Consider, for instance, that the founder of real estate developer Terra CRG, Ofer Cohen, is on the Museum's board of advisors, and that his company was one of the sponsors of 2014's "[Crossing Brooklyn: Art from Bushwick, Bed-Stuy, and Beyond](#)." Is it a coincidence that the exhibition's title name-checked *neighborhoods* over the names of artists, or that those neighborhoods are also scalding-hot real estate markets where [stories of displacements](#) and buyouts are common?

It is fair to say that Pasternak, brand-new to her role at Brooklyn Museum, cannot be held accountable for rental policies, and that her willingness to open a dialogue is a good sign. But it's worth mentioning that [Creative Time](#), the organization Pasternak led for 21 years, was criticized by some for failing to acknowledge gentrification anywhere in connection with Kara Walker's 2014 exhibition on the former Domino Sugar site.



image from [Hrag Vartanian](#)

It seems incredulous given the exhibition site will soon be luxury condos brought to you by Two Trees Management; but Walker's work was commissioned by Two Trees, and its leader, Jed

Walentas, co-chairs Creative Time's board. When asked about Walker's installation in the context of gentrification, Pasternak gave Gallerist a quote that was picked up in [Jeremiah Moss' *Vanishing New York*](#): "Our whole history as an organization is to use sites of transition. We know this is going to be a problem for people and that they're going to be examining our ethics."

Speaking of sites of transition, Creative Time, a nonprofit creator of public art who is "committed to presenting important art for our times and engaging broad audiences that transcend geographic, racial, and socioeconomic barriers," is also hosting a summit this weekend in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. Thanks to the *transition* that's been occurring there, Bed Stuy is, needless to say, [feeling great pain](#).

Transitions

In stable economies, artists and writers tend to remain independent and few join political interest groups. Politicians know this and in the past have been able to largely ignore artists' needs, without consequence. But conditions are finally becoming so dire for so many that there is no choice but to become a political force in the city. This petition rightfully looks to lay some blame at the doorstep of the Museum (for hosting the developers), but its strength is more in its unifying voice than the specifics of its requests. Its strength is in the number of artists and writers gathering to support a document that says, basically: [We Really Have Had Enough Of Being Sold To Developers, Especially By Our Own Institutions](#). As movements organize, under the banners of [#SaveNYC](#), [#TakebackNYC](#), [#SBJSA](#), [Artists Studio Affordability Project](#), [Brooklyn Anti-Gentrification Network/B.A.N.](#), and many others, I see artists and writers learning and sharing and getting better at using their voice.

Consider that the petition perhaps should have also named Eric Adams, Brooklyn's borough president. Adams is the scheduled keynote speaker at the summit and is [a frequent, enthusiastic speaker at pro-development events](#). The petition could have addressed the Museum's corporate sponsors and the partners who underwrite programming—sponsors who probably do not want 800+ petitioners connecting their brands to feelings of community betrayal. Developers have learned how to get what they want and artists will learn, too.

The requests articulated to the Museum—for a seat on the board and for an affordability conference that would wash the Museum's hands clean in a type of make-good gesture—were too easily and cheaply granted and do not go far enough in demanding that the Museum commit to a set of values (and policies to fulfill those values) that strengthens neighborhoods and culture, instead of commodifying them. This is the real fight that protesters must turn to, because the Brooklyn Museum's debt to the residents of Brooklyn is much larger than a summit or a board seat or a cancelled event can repay.

One institution, one decade: \$100 million gained in new assets.

(Commodification is real, y'all!)

As artists consider Pasternak's offer to begin a discussion, it seems essential to ask much tougher questions, and to ask for much more than she has offered so far. The danger in asking for too little is that you may end up getting everything you asked for... but not really winning.

I'm saying, gathering in protest is critical—but the Museum's rental policy is the least important thing that should be protested.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, November 11th, 2015 at 8:45 pm and is filed under [Uncategorized](#)

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