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RENOVATIONS

Source: Adapted from KPIX 5 (CBS San Francisco), “Famed Presidio Wooden ‘Spire’ Sculpture Damaged By Early Tuesday Morning Fire,” June 23, 2020. Image credited to San Fran Bay Man.

In 2014, I spent a few months interning at a high-end architecture firm five floors above the Dean & DeLuca flagship in SoHo. We were rushing an overnight to an architectural review board in the Hamptons the night the grand jury declined to indict Daniel Pantaleo for the murder of Eric Garner. Chants thudded down Broadway while I dropped textures into a rendering. By the time I stepped out with the shipment, a protester was reviewing the architecture of a nearby Citibank with a brick.

Six years later, I found myself outside the old Dean & DeLuca again, watching a teenager fashion a bandolier from the charred bumper of a patrol vehicle. The Dean & DeLuca chain—acquired by a Thai property developer a week prior to the Eric Garner protests—had since been stripped down to its franchising fees, the flagship boarded up since the previous fall. On that warm June night, the shuttered legacy luxury brand appeared as an accidental harbinger of the COVID-19 retail apocalypse and the protests now taking hold.

I continued up Broadway with my friends towards the Strand, drawn to the glow of burning scaffolding projected across its face. A few of us pulled ourselves up by the grillwork of Grace Church to survey the thronging crowd. Some other artists came over to say hi. People talked about Occupy. The riot cordon advanced and everyone took off running.

At work the next morning, I dropped jpegs of my boss's paintings into a virtual gallery.

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Within a week of George Floyd's murder, art institutions began to send out feelers to test the duration and extent of the commitment they would have to make to the protests against racialized police violence and the broader Black Lives Matter movement. Due to the lockdowns, much of this moralizing occurred on social media, where feeds clogged with posts pairing institutional bona fides with noncommittal copy endorsing racial equity. In one exceptional example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art independently circulated works by Glenn Ligon from their collections in contravention of the artist's own image rights. Until the outcry broke, it seemed to be the rare occasion on which critical art had proven politically effective for someone.

As one reality unfolded on the internet, quite a different one materialized offline. Amidst the acrid fog of lighter-fluid-fueled trash fires that dotted the Bowery in early June, the New Museum stood sheathed in plywood and a thicket of police barricades. The long-running antagonism between

art's discursive commitments and its real social and economic conditions seemed to have broken out into street-to-street fighting.

For months, art institutions had watched worryingly as their audiences mutated into biological threats, starving them of income. When the threats became political, the institutions—following the minor history of artists who close exhibition spaces—broke the fourth wall in order to put up a fifth.[1] But the barricades they erected did not merely close their "public" spaces—they enclosed them. Against the critical claims of art's legitimizing discourses, art's legitimizing institutions conceded their material conditions (and necessarily so: their constitutional commitment to private property hobbles their professed intention to secure a more just and equitable world). Rather than mark and fortify the institutional exterior, the barricades extended and made visible the processes of value production that comprise these institutions' inner, hidden cores.

Some institutions asserted their authorial tendencies further, as if to emphasize the extent to which substantive reforms had already been foreclosed. SFMOMA commissioned four large posters of dissenting text to be wheatpasted onto the wall it erected, performing a convincing fiction of an institution being held to account by guerilla tactics; Artists Space battened down, withdrawing Jana Euler's slug from its façade (its departure marked by two ratchet straps in place of the customary trail of slime); the New Museum camouflaged as a construction site behind hunter green fencing. Not even the defacement of the temporary structure was left to chance.

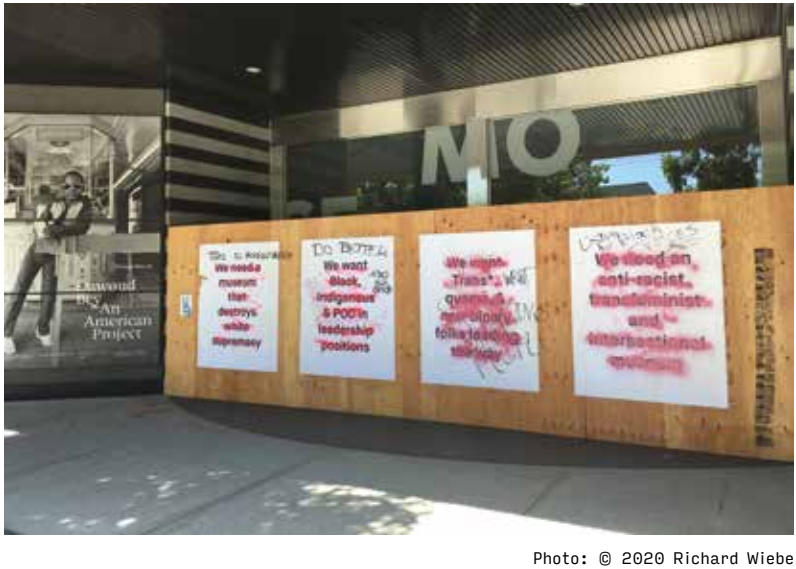

Photo: © 2020 Richard Wiebe

While the observations in this essay have developed out of my own experiences in New York and San Francisco, the antagonisms they describe are a microcosm of much greater transformations currently underway. In the United States in particular, the failure of the legacy art world to maintain some purchase on the popular imagination is an epiphenomenon of the failure of its institutions to promote objectives beyond immediate self-interest. As institutions have absorbed ever greater amounts of private wealth, this self-interest has increasingly identified with the larger plutocracy in which it is embedded.

Under neoliberalism, the infrastructure that developed to support the twentieth-century art world—museums, galleries, schools, publications, discourses—came to form the horizon of artistic production. From the professional mandate of graduate degree work to the instrumentalization of art as popular entertainment, legacy art institutions strategically realigned themselves in order to buttress and improve their position as gatekeepers. When contradictions surfaced (e.g., the conflict between the progressive values art institutions project and the profiteering of their monied patrons), their resolutions tended to balance the institution's immediate material interests against its long-term interest in preserving its prerogative to define and interpret artistic activity (which secured its future material interests).[2]

Though art institutions have expended substantial resources to cultivate an aura of legitimacy and permanence, the external crises they faced this past year remind us that the institutions themselves are not quite so determinative as the cult of money in which they are enmeshed. If the story of the past 20 years is the disarticulation of price from cultural value, the story of the past 10 months is that price is the only common measure of cultural value that remains. The "art world" as it has been mythically constituted over the past few decades has been transcended by a new "populist" bubble, which finally abandons the premise that the art market has some originary foundation in the cultural value that the art world's gatekeepers assign. These speculative valuations are produced externally, in other non-art parts of the culture ecosystem, where—as with the populism of contemporary politics—the lines between authentic engagement and plutocratic astroturfing are purposely blurred. With the triumph of money as the final arbiter, the Faustian bargain of the art world comes due: institutions must either yield and reorient themselves or lose their power as gatekeepers.

Enclosures

Crises often augur widespread devaluations of assets. Low demand fuels cycles of selloffs: property and asset prices crash, investment income diminishes. With the primary economic engines of the art world in retreat this past year, the leveraged positions taken on by legacy art institutions have appeared all the more unsustainable: major institutions chase losses on large overhead until asset prices recover and revenue reappears or they fold.[3] (Smaller art institutions, which depend more heavily on municipal support, will continue to be squeezed for years as declining property values depress tax revenues.)

In the decade following the global financial crash, a spate of building projects swept New York's major art institutions: the Whitney in 2015 ($422 million for the Gansevoort building), the Museum of Modern Art in 2019 (a $450 million expansion of its main campus), and the Met throughout the later 2010s (including a $13 million renovation of the Met Breuer, an $18 million renovation of its British decorative arts galleries, and a $150 million skylight replacement, with a $70 million renovation of its Rockefeller Wing and a $600 million renovation of its Modern Wing still to come). But capital campaigns organized around renovations and new construction fail to provide for the costs of operating those same infrastructures during downturns. Under other circumstances, the New Museum's hunter green cladding would have heralded the groundbreaking of its own $63 million expansion, announced to much fanfare in the summer of 2019 at the height of protests by its union employees in support of stalled contract negotiations. Instead, management gutted the union, keeping only a quarter of its 84 members on payroll.

Financial pressures also compel institutions to contrive novel ways to profit off of existing infrastructures. During the 2008 financial crisis, the Art Institute of Chicago partitioned its debt-burdened school away from the museum's assets, forcing the school to sell its portfolio of properties in order to stay afloat. The school in turn collateralized its debts by increasing its enrollment of foreign students ineligible for financial aid. In the course of the pandemic, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago has doubled down on this recession-era gamble, introducing rotating shift schedules to staff a virtual shadow school for students in East Asia.

Meanwhile, those in a position to buy up devalued assets during the pandemic have already achieved tremendous returns on investment.[4] For those who have capitalized on the crisis, it becomes exigent to offset taxes on new gains. Family

art foundations, for instance, function as tax-advantaged investment vehicles which allow families to "borrow" works for display in their own homes. Take it from the curator at one such foundation, who reports, "The last time we bought work like this was 2008." In the same moment that the crisis highlights the unsustainability of the art world for producers—debt-fueled education, precarious labor conditions, extreme income inequality—it also demonstrates how "essential" the art world's luxury economy is for consumers, who continue to seek high-return investments and tax shelters as a new era of Fed-subsidized money and near-zero interest rates dawns.

Closures

In August 2020, the Brookings Institution estimated that 1.4 million jobs had been lost in the fine and performing arts. That ominous tone echoed a July 2020 survey of the American Alliance of Museums, which reported that one-third of U.S. museums may permanently close as a result of the pandemic. Some institutions have since shuttered. Others, facing hazardous financial straits after months of lost revenue and the exhaustion of bailout funds, have unevenly distributed their hardships, cutting "non-essential" staff and programming. A third category have renegotiated their primary responsibilities and commitments, revisiting contentious practices such as deaccessioning. In each instance, the arc bends towards privatization. If the enduring impact of the pandemic is the end of middles—mid-size businesses, mid-size incomes, mid-size institutions and galleries (Gavin Brown, Metro Pictures)—the K-shaped flight to extremes portends less diversity and less volume in the art world to come.

While major art institutions will maintain solvency, their priorities will change. At the outset of the pandemic, MoMA quickly halved its exhibitions and publications budgets. If the trend holds, new exhibitions will increasingly follow the example of the 2008 recession, when three-quarters of museum exhibitions derived from permanent collections. In some instances, culture war dynamics have been operationalized as cover for these changes. The announcement postponing *Philip Guston Now* first suggested that additional time was needed to recontextualize the artist's depictions of robed Klansmen; only later did an institutional representative concede that "logistical challenges and the cost of shipping works during the pandemic also figured in the plan to delay the show."[5]

Museums have similarly dissembled on the matter of deaccessioning, after the American Association of Art Museum Directors suspended many of its restrictions in April 2020. The arguments against deaccessioning are by no means settled, especially since many collections constitutively exclude women artists and artists of color. But there should be no mistake: deaccessioning is the final frontier in the total hegemony of money. The outflow of objects from the (nominally) public trust into the distributed warehouses of the

ultra-rich repeats the enclosure of the barricades, materially undermining the rhetoric of diversity and equity initiatives.

With fewer funds to allocate towards research, loans, and new acquisitions, major art institutions will become both more conservative and more local. As the scope of mainstream concerns narrows, the downstream ecosystem will experience feedback effects. Fewer opportunities for the uptake of new artists and ideas reduces the number of cultural participants/aspirants and intensifies competition among those who remain. As institutions cycle through a fixed quantum of content, niche movements will multiply. The throttling of the mainstream will deepen the divergence of "dark forest" communities hitched to micro-economies, with paywalled content production straining to supplant the lost "middle." These alternative outlets will further destabilize the surviving institutions: the ascendant Patreon-Substack-OnlyFans regime generalizes the outsider entrepreneurialism of a Beeple or KAWS (which itself appeals to the rugged individualism of the "founder" mentality), establishing an extra-institutional market to determine the price of every individual "creator." As the institutional safety net continues to shred, compensation is collectivized but only in the most precarious, neoliberal ways.

Constructions

Pace, Hauser & Wirth, and Sotheby's all decamped to satellite locations in the Hamptons during the summer of 2020, with a slew of secondary-market dealers following suit. On the opening of Pace East Hampton, Pace's founder commented, "The collectors are here, and the work has to be seen." For all the apparent happenstance, however, the relocations provided useful prototypes for future ventures. Heavyweights, such as Pace and Sotheby's, and mid-size galleries, such as Mitchell-Innes & Nash and Paula Cooper, all inked short-term leases in Florida for winter 2021, citing the success of the East Hampton ventures: "They would come in in golf outfits and bathing suits and flip-flops, so it was much less formal, and there was more dialogue about art objects."[6]

The much-speculated demise of the art fair gives way to an even more exclusive viewing experience, a traveling circus of mega-galleries chasing ultra-rich patrons from gilded enclave to gilded enclave. The surf and turf leisure economy is in; staid public-facing institutions are out. Far from the prying eyes of art critics, galleries import their most decorative stock—the press text for the inaugural show at Paula Cooper South advertised how the works celebrated

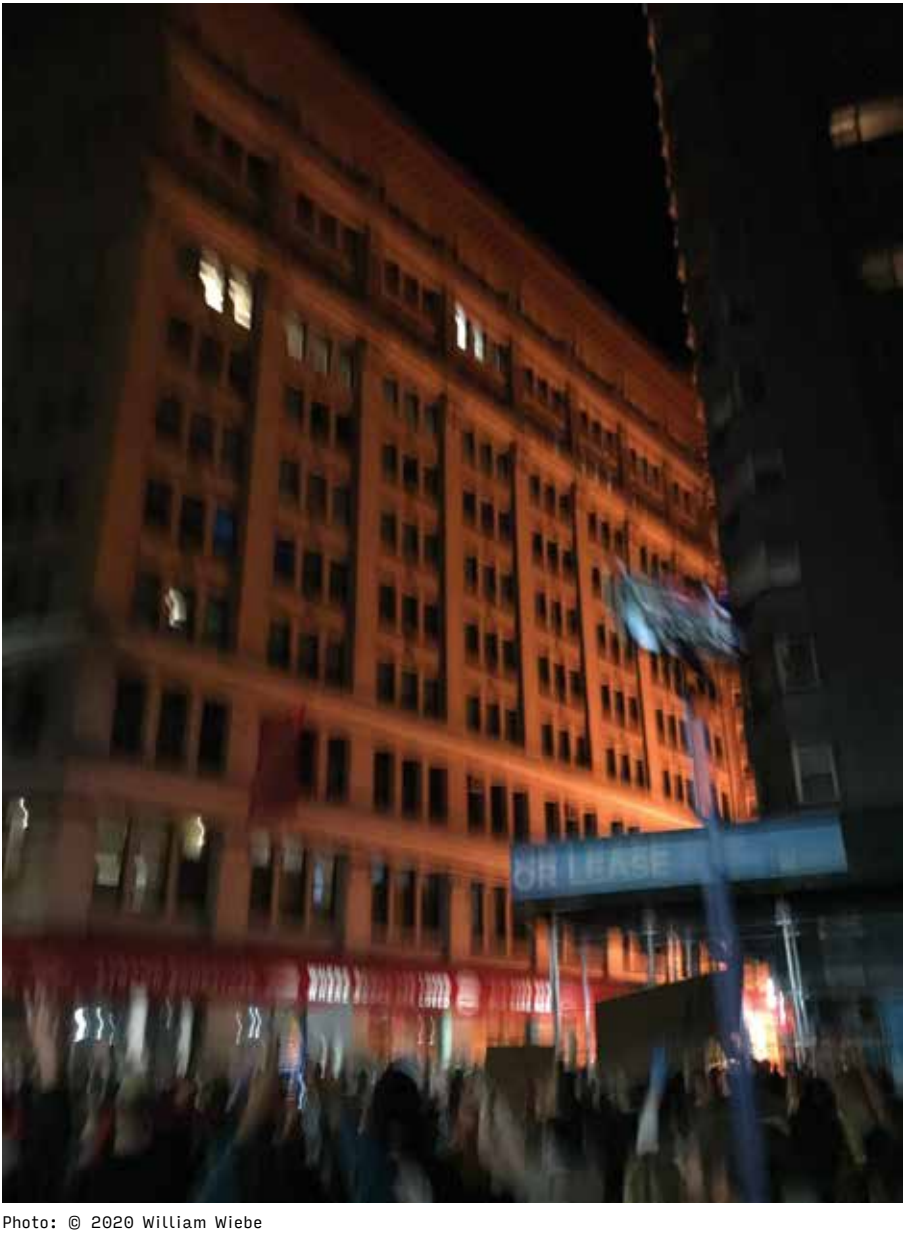

Photo: © 2020 William Wiebe

"the vibrant life of Palm Beach and the surrounding area" (43 billionaires/7.8 square miles). With sales volume booming, the gallery has committed to a permanent Florida expansion; elsewhere, a new crop of pop-ups promises to fête Aspen later this year (75 billionaires/3.5 square miles). The proximity of these galleries' flagship locations to a broader public seems purely accidental in retrospect (Manhattan: 105 billionaires/22.8 square miles).

As mega-galleries move their inventory closer and closer to collectors' homes, they begin to resemble Amazon in more than just their monopolistic tendencies. Seen with the barricades, these last-mile warehouses underscore an old truth in a new way: the reality of the exhibition venue as logistics hub, a dry port for goods to rest as they transit between networks, increasingly striking the more the other aspects of the institution disappear. This reality shows when art institutions represent themselves not as the privileged spaces they stake out in their mission statements but as sites that must be defended against riots and other forms of circulation struggle. It shows when mega-galleries depart their roosts, when museums deaccession works—when the motive to simply move product gives the lie to curation and criticism. The fortification of the institution proves to be the architectural corollary to the loss of its physical interface, the becoming-distribution-center of everything.

Renovations

The departure of galleries flags the changing conditions of urban life. In its uneven distribution of effects, the pandemic brings into focus a world riven into enclaves, renewing the pressure of geographic arbitrage on the legacy art world's urban strongholds. The dissolution of the "urban core" is really the dissolution of a certain vision of urbanization, built around a tranche of capital-intensive sectors and the massive service industries they support. We are told that the path forward wends through declining tax revenues and retrenchments, emaciated city governments and death spirals.

For the legacy art world, these crises are not merely economic but ontological. The barricades that institutions erected in the summer of 2020 defended them against an enemy they had conjured from history; in reality, there were no Communards clamoring to set fire to their storehouses. The declining relevance of the legacy institution is pictured less by an image of the Louvre burning than by an image of Andy Goldsworthy's *Spire* aflame in San Francisco's Presidio that June. At a board meeting of the Presidio Trust a month later, its CEO reported, "We have no evidence that this [fire]

was deliberately set … Clearly it was caused by human causes …, but our best guess is that it was caused due to an illegal encampment near the *Spire*." Art, here, appears as the casualty of a larger social crisis in which it is powerless to intervene.

The artist's essay typically renovates a political project dredged from art history. But art history's own shibboleths call the new value configurations into question. If a defining feature of a bubble is the propensity for financial speculation to dominate every social interaction, that distortionary effect may be felt most acutely in social worlds already governed by luxury economies.[7] Beyond the barricades, the budget constrictions, and the Florida gallery outposts, which feverishly seek to extract new profits from old forms of artistic value, a speculative frenzy awaits. It takes the art world's obsession with money at face value, finally mooting art's claim to be something other than what it *is* (socially and economically).

The more precarious the conditions of artistic production, the stronger the reciprocal desire to strike it rich becomes. The task then is to mobilize against the economic structure that determines our social existence. So long as society retains its plutocratic composition, it will be left to those artists least reliant on the infrastructures that reify and enforce plutocratic values to describe and agitate against the crises to come. If there is no companion project of institution-building, however, these practices will fail to cohere into cultural projects that can be taken up by others. Without the necessary narrative infrastructure, their propositions will go unanswered.

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When I passed SFMOMA again that August, the barricades had regressed from their Constructivist political agitations into so many Suprematist elements. After a summer of black squares on feeds, it was a strange comfort to see them extruded back out into real space. Kazimir Malevich had formulated Suprematism as an attempt "to free art from the dead weight of the real world."[8] And yet, like every other aesthetic practice that has promised a reprieve from real material conditions, it was structured in dominance, only the most efficient form for hiding a racist scrawl.

The renovated barricades, however, looked as if they owed less to the institution's reactionary politics than its blank nihilism. I imagined a lone preparator carefully pin-mounting Dante's chthonic inscription on the donor wall in the atrium beyond.

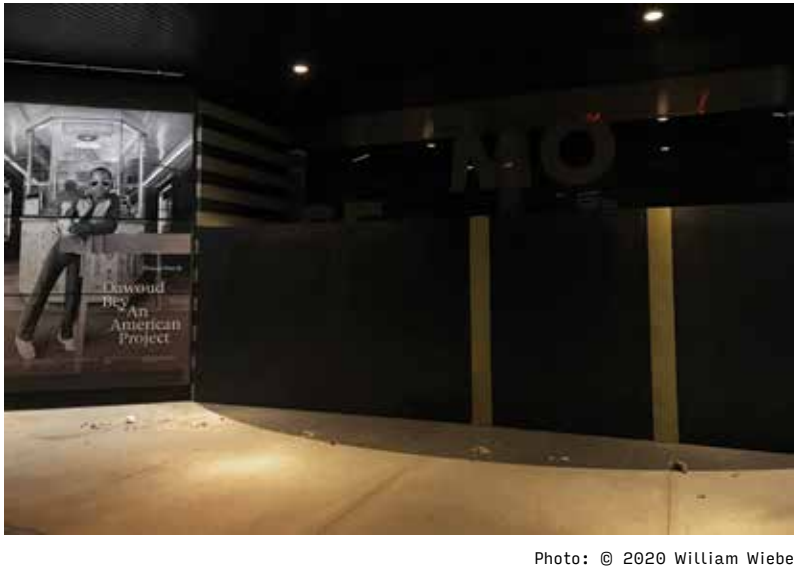

Photo: © 2020 William Wiebe

Thanks to Alexander Alberro, Duncan Bass, Aron Chilewich, Selina Grüter, Jesse Meredith, and Benjamin Tiven for their comments and support.

1 For a comprehensive accounting of this history, see the 2016 exhibition at Fri Art, *A Retrospective of Closed Exhibitions*.

2 Recent efforts to reform art institutions have targeted their compositional elements: governance (the misdeeds of errant board members and the allocation of board seats); management (exhibition and acquisitions practices); and labor (labor organizing). The proposed reforms, however, are overdetermined by the plutocracy they purport to combat: shareholder models of governance shroud the cabals of the ultra-rich in the vestments of corporate accountability; petitions for procedural justice reify art as a winner-take-all system and incentivize neoliberal performance metrics within institutions; labor mobilization often bleeds over into corporatist overidentification. The marketplace of ideas is also an oligopoly.

3 Visitors typically provide between 25 and 50 percent of a major art institution's annual operating budget and comprise between 20 and 30 percent of its total revenue (including admissions, memberships, museum stores, and restaurants). In its 2018 tax filing, the New Museum reported that 20.5 percent of its revenue came from visitors; for MoMA, it was 23.9 percent; for the Whitney, 24.9 percent; and for SFMOMA, 30.6 percent.

4 Like the collapse of the housing bubble in 2007–2008, the February–March 2020 stock market crash precipitated massive new concentrations of wealth. In the 10 months between March 18, 2020 and January 18, 2021, the combined wealth of the United States' 660 billionaires increased by 38.6 percent, to $4.1 trillion. While the 34 percent decline of the stock market to its March 23, 2020 low was quickly re-couped, the recovery was unevenly distributed amongst firms: Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, and Google gained 52 percent year-over-year while the remaining 495 companies in the S&P 500 posted a comparatively meager 9 percent return. When large firms are the only ones that can weather a downturn, the pejorative leveled at large banks—"too big to fail"—plays again in a different key.

5 Alex Greenberger, "Philip Guston Blockbuster Pushed Back to 2024 Amid Concerns Over KKK Imagery," *ARTnews*, Sept. 24, 2020.

6 David Schrader, global head of private sales at Sotheby's, quoted in Sophie Haigney, "Galleries and an Auction House Follow Collectors to Florida," *The New York Times*, Oct. 1, 2020.

7 William J. Bernstein, *The Delusions of Crowds: Why People Go Mad in Groups* (New York: Grove Atlantic, 2021), 5.

8 Kazimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World* (Dessau, Germany: Bauhaus Books, 1927).

Biographies

William Wiebe is an artist, filmmaker, and writer. He studies the production of objectivity by social institutions. His recent work has been presented at 062 Gallery, Chicago; the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York; and NeMe Arts Centre, Cyprus. He has also offered non-academic lectures based on his research at venues including the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; the Art Institute of Chicago; and the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. He holds a BA from Wesleyan University and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and was a participant in the University of Chicago Arts, Science & Culture Initiative and the Whitney Independent Study Program. From 2018–19, he was a U.S. Fulbright Fellow in Cyprus and the inaugural Postgraduate Research Fellow in the Department of Fine Arts at the Cyprus University of Technology.
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