

Arts and Influence: Untangling Corporate Engagement in the Cultural Sector

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Abstract

A growing interest in cultural heritage by the corporate sector has offered new opportunities to safeguard, protect, and present both tangible and intangible heritage. Through strategic investments of capital, expertise, and technology into the cultural sector, corporations offer an opportunity to revitalize a sector beleaguered with precarious government funding and unpredictable public support.

Google Arts and Culture, a non-profit initiative of Alphabet, Inc. created a robust digital platform to provide unprecedented access to the collections of museums and cultural institutions around the world through high-resolution images and virtual tours. Dispatching teams of photographers with cutting-edge technology, Google Arts and Culture provides, pro bono, what were previously expensive projects for cultural organizations to undertake.

While investments from and engagement by corporations like Alphabet may seem to be a boon to the cultural sector, they present a myriad of complex legal and ethical challenges. In order to provide desirable open access, these initiatives commoditize cultural heritage into intellectual property and digital assets. The rights to this property are shared with the corporate sponsor, but to what degree does that same sponsor have an obligation of stewardship? Further, does even the curation and selection of partnering institutions advance a specific advantageous economic narrative for the corporation?

The involvement of corporations in charitable work has come under fire recently. Critics of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs suggest these practices are only marginally effective and draw attention away from the socially detrimental externalities of a corporation's core business.

This paper examines the core questions created by corporate involvement to safeguard and present cultural heritage.

Corporate and commercial involvement in cultural heritage has provided opportunities to preserve, protect, and present both tangible and intangible heritage. Through strategic investments of capital, expertise, and technology, commercial engagement can sustain a cultural sector beleaguered with precarious government funding and challenged by unpredictable public support. Such support would complement the deep subject matter expertise that cultural organizations offer. Cultural organizations curate and present programs, performances, and exhibitions that often address complex subjects. They then broker the relationship between that

content and the communities their organizations serve. Cultural organizations are not above reproach, and in recent years both individual cultural organizations and the larger sector have seen increased scrutiny.

Recent publications such as Anand Giridharadas's *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*⁹, Rob Reich's *Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better*¹⁰ and David Callahan's *The Givers: Money, Power, and Philanthropy in a New Gilded Age*¹¹ interrogate the philanthropic funding model that underpins the non-profit part cultural sector. While each considers the financing of the cultural sector as a means by which individuals and corporations can launder their reputation through the endowment of directorships, the funding of capital projects and the bequeath of personal collections, it can be argued that the insidiousness of this influence goes farther.

In the wake of the U.S. 2016 election, Facebook, Inc., the role that their eponymous flagship social media platform may have played in influencing the election was evident. The platform offers a feed of content that is organized by algorithm draws on, but doesn't adhere strictly to, user behaviors and preferences. The algorithms deployed on Facebook are proprietary and notoriously opaque.¹² It was later discovered that users of the networks created accounts and populated profiles with fake information to inundate the site with inaccurate information ("fake news") and divisive opinions that may have played a significant role in influencing the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election.¹³

This crisis posed an argument about whether Facebook is a platform (i.e., a 'public square') or a publisher, and if being a platform would abdicate Facebook of its responsibility to moderate the content shared on the platform. This distinction brought into focused the difference between the prevalent values of the technology sector, specifically those associated with Silicon Valley-based companies, and the public interest beyond the scope of the technology sector.¹⁴

Google Inc., whose headquarters (the "Googleplex") is situated in Silicon Valley, has been subject to similar scrutiny. Their search engine algorithm has been the subject of a U.S. Senate hearing to determine whether Google is engaged in antitrust activities.¹⁵

9 Anand Giridharadas, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, First Edition, First Printing edition (New York: Knopf, 2018).

10 Rob Reich, *Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).

11 David Callahan, *The Givers: Wealth, Power, and Philanthropy in a New Gilded Age*, First Edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017).

12 "Facebook to Reveal News Feed Algorithm Secrets," *BBC News*, April 1, 2019, sec. Technology, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-47771922>.

13 Alexis C. Madrigal, "What Facebook Did to American Democracy," *The Atlantic*, October 12, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/10/what-facebook-did/542502/>.

14 Sam Levin, "Is Facebook a Publisher? In Public It Says No, but in Court It Says Yes," *The Guardian*, July 3, 2018, sec. Technology, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jul/02/facebook-mark-zuckerberg-platform-publisher-lawsuit>.

15 Steve Lohr, "Google's Competitors Square Off Against Its Leader," *The New York Times*, September 21, 2011, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/22/technology/google-takes-the-hot-seat-in-washington.html>.

In 2011 Google formed what would become Google Arts & Culture, a non-profit initiative whose mission is “to preserve and bring the world’s art and culture online, so it’s accessible to anyone, anywhere.”¹⁶ In a blog post published the same year, Amit Sood, the head of Google Arts & Culture (then Google Art Project), explains the genesis of the initiative:

It started when a small group of us who were passionate about art got together to think about how we might use our technology to help museums make their art more accessible—not just to regular museumgoers or those fortunate to have great galleries on their doorsteps, but to a whole new set of people who might otherwise never get to see the real thing up close.¹⁷

This story Google Art Project recalls a common technology startup genesis myth: a small group of passionate innovators bands together to solve a complex problem.

Google Arts & Culture dispatches teams of photographers with cutting-edge technology to photograph artworks in museums and adds these images to a public-facing website. Much like a museum’s own collection database, the Google Arts & Culture provides detailed information about each artwork (artist, date created, medium, etc.). But unlike an individual museum’s website, it offers users the ability to explore works by formal, thematic, or historical connections across the collections of all museums hosted on the Google Arts & Culture platform.

In a sense, Google Arts & Culture’s effort to catalog the world’s art is an extension of Google’s mission, “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.”¹⁸ And it does so in a way that draws heavily on Google’s overarching brand vocabulary: white background, san-serif fonts, generous negative space, and uncluttered compositions. It is image-forward, pushing the primacy of art and letting the background recede, and it is not at odds with the stark exhibitions in commercial galleries, art fair presentations, and contemporary museums.

In his 2011 TED talk, Amit Sood concludes with a statement foregrounding the artwork over the delivery:

...the main thing is that all the amazing stuff here does not really come from Google. It doesn’t, in my opinion, even come from the museums. I probably shouldn’t say that. It really comes from these artists¹⁹

¹⁶ “About Google Cultural Institute,” accessed October 11, 2020, <https://about.artsandculture.google.com/>.

¹⁷ “Explore Museums and Great Works of Art in the Google Art Project,” Official Google Blog (blog), accessed October 7, 2020, <https://googleblog.blogspot.com/2011/02/explore-museums-and-great-works-of-art.html>.

¹⁸ “About Google, Our Culture & Company News,” Google, accessed October 13, 2020, <http://about.google/>.

¹⁹ Amit Sood, “Building a Museum of Museums on the Web” (TED Conference, Long Beach Performing Arts Center, March 1, 2011).

The initiative received significant attention from the public but also received early criticism for its limited content²⁰ and Eurocentric focus.²¹ In Google's defense, this may partially be a function of the copyright challenges that U.S. museums face. Under U.S. copyright law, works of art are protected for a term lasting for the duration of the creator's life and an additional subsequent seventy years.²² Thus, many contemporary works remain under the artists' copyright, but for many "old master" works (which are predominantly European men²³), the copyright has expired. Securing the rights to present an image of a work under copyright is an added step of licensing the work and may constitute an additional expense in securing that licenses with artists or her agent.

But the restrictions set by the copyright are layered on top of the much larger, systemic, and more complex issue of representation in museums' collections.

Google Arts & Culture added a feature to the iOS and Android application that matched users' "selfies" with representative portraits sourced from across the collections of museums on its platform. People of color, specifically Asian and Latin American users, observed results that either features stereotypical images or don't match their ethnicity at all.²⁴ This was likely not an issue with the algorithm, the more so a reflection of the artwork on the platform.

In 2019, half a century after the Arts Workers Coalition first demanded greater representation of black artists at the Museum of Modern Art, a study of 18 major U.S. museums (Including MoMA, the National Gallery of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, among others) found that 85.4% of the works in the collections of the museums are attributed to white artists.²⁵

In seeking to create an engaging and "playful²⁶" experience with art, the developers of Google's *Art Selfie* made a powerful statement about the representation of people of color in museum collections. In their efforts to democratize museums, Google overlooked the complex internal rifts that museums are undergoing regarding equity, access, inclusion, and stakeholders, some of which are discussed later in this essay.

These rifts aren't unique to museums. Recently, the caricaturistic portrayal of Asia characters and themese in ballet has come under fire, paired with the limited representation of ethnically

²⁰ "The Problem with Google's Art Project," *The Telegraph*, accessed October 7, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/8296251/The-problem-with-Google-Art-Project.html>.

²¹ "Getting in Close and Impersonal: Google Art Project," *The Economist Newspaper Ltd*, February 3, 2011, <https://www.economist.com/prospero/2011/02/03/getting-in-close-and-impersonal>.

²² United States Copyright Office, "Circular 15a: Duration of Copyright," 2011, 1.

²³ "Gender Bias Reveals Consequences For Female Artists," *NPR.org*, accessed October 26, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/24/799163534/gender-bias-reveals-consequences-for-female-artists>.

²⁴ Michael Nuñez, "The Google Arts and Culture App Has a Race Problem," *Mashable* (blog), January 16, 2018, <https://mashable.com/2018/01/16/google-arts-culture-app-race-problem-racist/>.

²⁵ Chad M. Topaz et al., "Diversity of Artists in Major U.S. Museums," *PLoS ONE* 14, no. 3 (March 20, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0212852>.

²⁶ "Art Selfie," *Google Arts & Culture*, accessed October 26, 2020, <https://artsandculture.google.com/camera/selfie>.

Asian dancers onstage.²⁷ A 2016 Report from the League of American Orchestras found that just 2.5% of musicians in the U.S. identify as Latinx and only 1.8% nationally identify as African American.²⁸ Social media has offered a platform to anonymously compile and share the collected experiences of musicians and performers who have experienced racism. Instagram accounts, such as Orchestra Is Racist²⁹ and Opera is Racist,³⁰ collect, curate, and present the personal narratives of the staff and performer of cultural organizations that have experienced racism in their work at cultural organizations.

Instagram, a photo-sharing platform purchased by Facebook, Inc. in 2012³¹, has been used by artists, galleries, and auction houses to promote and sell artwork. But the platform has rapidly developed an outsized influence on the market with little transparency into how much or how little control Facebook, Inc. directly exercises with works posted on its platform.

Users may sort their feed either chronologically with images posted more recently being seen first or using by using Instagram's algorithm. The algorithm by which Instagram sorts content in an individual users' feed, like Facebook's algorithm, is opaque. The introduction of the algorithm, initially replacing the chronological feed, was met with backlash by Instagram users.³² This sudden change might remind some of an experiment that Facebook conducted on its platform. Over one week in 2012 Facebook manipulated the feeds of 700,000 users to test how users would respond to different emotional content. Subjects of the experiment, drawn from users of the platform were neither notified nor consented to being included in the study.³³ Some of the unwitting subjects of the experiment even received a stream of sad content to induce negative emotions.³⁴

While museums seek to acquire and present works that are significant and meaningful, they are subject to the price of artworks set by dealers and at auction; and the enthusiasm that acquisition of these works will generate among their audiences and stakeholders. Instagram's ability to amplify prominent artists like Yayoi Kusama³⁵ and Kara Walker³⁶ is clear. Both artists

²⁷ Phil Chan and Michele Chase, *Final Bow for Yellowface: Dancing between Intention and Impact*, 2020.

²⁸ James Doerer, Ph.D., "Racial / Ethnic and Gender Diversity in the Orchestra Field" (League of American Orchestras, September 2016), <http://americanorchestras.org/images/stories/diversity/Racial-Ethnic-and-Gender-Diversity-in-the-Orchestra-Field-Final-92116.pdf>.

²⁹ @orchestraisracist, "Orchestra Is Racist," accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/orchestraisracist/>.

³⁰ @operairacist, "Opera Is Racist," Instagram, accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/operairacist/>.

³¹ Evelyn M. Rusli, "Facebook Buys Instagram for \$1 Billion," *New York Times*, 1333991748, <http://dealbook.nytimes.com/2012/04/09/facebook-buys-instagram-for-1-billion/>.

³² "Instagram Will Show More Recent Posts Due to Algorithm Backlash," *TechCrunch* (blog), accessed October 13, 2020, <https://social.techcrunch.com/2018/03/22/instagram-recent/>.

³³ "Facebook Admits Failings over Emotion Manipulation Study," *BBC News*, October 3, 2014, sec. Technology, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-29475019>.

³⁴ "Facebook Emotion Experiment Sparks Criticism," *BBC News*, June 30, 2014, sec. Technology, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-28051930>.

³⁵ Mia Feitel, "At 90, Yayoi Kusama Is More Popular Than Ever," *ELLE*, November 7, 2019, <https://www.elle.com/culture/a29726826/yayoi-kusama-infinity-room-macys-parade/>.

have benefitted from the additional exposure – drawing sizable crowds to their already well-recognized work and leveraging the FOMO (fear of missing out) phenomenon for those less acquainted with the art world. For less-recognized artists, Instagram creates pressure to develop work that is optimized for this platform. The inclusion of hashtags with Instagram posts demonstrates a conscientious effort on the part of content creators to manipulate both the search functions and sorting algorithms of Instagram.

It is easy to imagine how Instagram could use its algorithm to influence the art world whether intentionally or unintentionally. Even minor alterations to the algorithm could have a lasting social impact. With artwork being subjective, experiential, and personal, detecting such changes would be difficult if not impossible.

To examine how Instagram might wield this influence, we can consider its approach to content moderation and censorship. The application of Instagram’s moderation is visible, and artists have reported their work being removed from the platform. Three such examples have received press attention: a photo that was taken and posted by artist Petra Collins of her covered, but unshaven, bikini line³⁷; poet Rupi Kaur’s photograph of a woman sleeping amongst period-stained clothing; and photographer Amalia Ulman’s topless portrait.³⁸ A 2017 publication by artists Arvida Byström and Molly Soda anthologize 270 similar images that were removed from this platform. A trend emerges across images and suggests that censors may be more likely to remove an image of a women’s body than a comparable image of a man’s body. As Grace Banks explains in her review of the book for *The Guardian*: “bare-chested men remain largely uncensored, while topless images of women are guaranteed to be deleted.”³⁹ Soda posits that this standard perpetuates a problematic social narrative, “It’s tied with shame, and with how women’s bodies, or more female-presenting bodies, are sexualized.”

The struggles of the cultural sector to navigate an emerging technocracy also come at a time of renewed attention to the influence that prominent cultural institutions exert on the world. Activists challenge the cultural sector to critically examine the ethical responsibilities, governance, and operations of cultural institutions through the lens of this influence.

In 2014, Gulf Ultra Luxury Front (G.U.L.F.), an offshoot of the activist group Gulf Labor Coalition, unfurled a 39-foot banner in the iconic rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum in New York City⁴⁰

³⁶ Stephanie Eckardt, “Kara Walker’s Latest Political Art Is Once Again an Unlikely Instagram Sensation,” *W Magazine*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/kara-walker-art-instagram/>.

³⁷ Petra Collins, “Why Instagram Censored My Body,” *The Huffington Post*, October 17, 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-instagram-censored-my-body_b_4118416.

³⁸ Molly Gottschalk, “The Photographs of Women’s Bodies That Instagram Censored,” *Artsy*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-photographs-womens-bodies-instagram-censored>.

³⁹ Grace Banks, “Pics Or It Didn’t Happen: Reclaiming Instagram’s Censored Art,” *The Guardian*, April 10, 2017, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/10/pics-or-it-didnt-happen-reclaiming-instagram-censored-art>.

⁴⁰ Mostafa Heddaya, “Protesters Unfurl Three-Story Banner in Guggenheim Museum,” *Hyperallergic*, November 6, 2014, <https://hyperallergic.com/161115/protesters-unfurl-three-story-banner-in-guggenheim-museum/>.

and led a picket in front of the museum on the evening of its gala.⁴¹ The messaging of these protests focused on concerns about migrant workers' rights in Abu Dhabi where the Guggenheim Foundation planned to construct its next museum. Following a meeting with the Gulf Labor in 2016 about these concerns, the Guggenheim leadership withdrew from further talks with the group, citing them as "unproductive" and asserting demands outside of the reach of an arts institution. In an open letter, Armstrong expressed a continuing commitment to workers' welfare on the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi project.⁴²

While the Guggenheim struggled to manage the potential externalities of its expansion, the rifts of internal conflict surfaced. A Better Guggenheim interrogates the leadership of the Guggenheim Foundation and, in an open letter to the Guggenheim Museum Board demanded that the institution, among other things, "Work with staff to uproot violent, exclusionary structures within the museum" and "Engage, listen to, and compensate any BIPOC consultants, scholars, staff, and students who offer guidance to undertake anti-racist work."⁴³

On June 9, 2020, Armstrong released a letter to stakeholders of the Guggenheim.

We are dedicating ourselves to creating paths that lead to a more inclusive and diverse museum and workplace...While we have made some progress, we know we have much more learning and unlearning to do. We recognize the importance of developing inclusive programming, deepening community engagement, and diversifying our collection and exhibitions, staff, and board of trustees.⁴⁴

In August 2020 The Guggenheim Museum and Foundation approved a detailed plan to address complaints of entrenched racism within its walls. It is one of the first major cultural organizations to provide details of an expanded diversity effort.

These predicaments are neither without precedent nor unique to the Guggenheim. In the 1960s, the activist group Art Workers' Coalition sought to pressure another New York City institution, the Museum of Modern Art, into implemented significant reforms including "a section of the museum under the direction of black artists,⁴⁵" the removal of Nelson Rockefeller, then

⁴¹ Mostafa Heddaya, "Activists Picket Guggenheim Gala over Labor Abuses," Hyperallergic, November 7, 2014, <https://hyperallergic.com/161602/activists-picket-guggenheim-gala-over-labor-abuses/>.

⁴² Hrag Vartanian, "Guggenheim Breaks Off Negotiations with Gulf Labor Over Migrant Rights," Hyperallergic, April 17, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/291594/guggenheim-breaks-off-negotiations-with-gulf-labor-over-migrant-rights/>.

⁴³ A Better Guggenheim, "Letter to the Board," June 29, 2020, <https://abetterguggenheim.com/letter-to-board/>.

⁴⁴ Richard Armstrong, "A Message to Our Community," The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation, June 9, 2020, <https://www.guggenheim.org/news/a-message-to-our-community>.

⁴⁵ Michelle Elligott, "From the Archives: Faith Ringgold, the Art Workers Coalition, and the Fight for Inclusion at The Museum of Modern Art," *Inside/Out, a MoMA/MoMA PS1 Blog* (blog), July 29, 2016, https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2016/07/29/from-the-archives-faith-ringgold-the-art-workers-coalition-and-the-fight-for-inclusion-at-the-museum-of-modern-art/.

Governor of New York from the museums' board⁴⁶, and a public hearing on the museum's relationship to artists and to society.⁴⁷

Like Rockefeller, cultural institution board members are sometimes subject scrutiny for the sources of wealth, connections, and expertise that position them to serve on boards in the first place. New Sanctuary Coalition⁴⁸, Decolonize this Place⁴⁹, and other activist groups have sought either the removal of board members from their seats in prominent cultural organizations or for board members to divest from corporate interests that activists see in conflict with the values of the cultural sector.

A central function of the board is the 'governance' of the organizations. In their book on board leadership, Dennis D. Pointer and James E. Orlikoff explain this obligation concisely: "Boards bear ultimate authority and accountability for an organization's affairs. They are responsible for everything an organization is, does, and becomes."⁵⁰ A key responsibility of the board is also to recruit and oversee that organization's Chief Executive Officer (CEO). In many cultural organizations, the title of CEO is interchangeable with director or executive director or, in the case of the American Alliance of Museum Directors (AAMD), "director."

2014 report from the AAMD and National Center for Arts Research (NCAR) found that "Across all AAMD member museums, women hold less than 50% of directorships, and the average female director's salary lags behind that of the average male director."⁵¹ A 2017 update to the report found that "despite press attention and field-wide dialogue on the topic, the gender gap persists," but noted trends towards incremental gains in pay and employment representation.⁵² While the sector examines the leadership pipeline for museum directors, it must also consider the significant functions of boards in selecting directors.

The cultural sector faces negotiates commercial interests in the preservation of cultural heritage, architecture, and artifacts beyond the walls of institutions.

⁴⁶ Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, First paperback printing (Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 2010), 18.

⁴⁷ Elligott, "From the Archives: Faith Ringgold, the Art Workers Coalition, and the Fight for Inclusion at The Museum of Modern Art."

⁴⁸ "Arts Professionals Demand MoMA Board Member Larry Fink Divest from Private Prisons," accessed October 11, 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/news/arts-professionals-demand-moma-board-member-larry-fink-divest-from-prisons-81008>.

⁴⁹ Hrag Vartanian, "Whitney Museum Staffers Demand Answers After Vice Chair's Relationship to Tear Gas Manufacturer Is Revealed," *Hyperallergic*, November 30, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/473702/whitney-tear-gas-manufacturer-is-revealed/>.

⁵⁰ Dennis D. Pointer and James E. Orlikoff, *The High-Performance Board: Principles of Nonprofit Organization Governance*, 1st ed, The Jossey-Bass Nonprofit and Public Management Series (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 2.

⁵¹ Anne Marie Gan et al., "The Gender Gap in Art Museum Directorships," n.d., 15.

⁵² Veronica Treviño et al., "The Ongoing Gender Gap in Art Museum Directorships" (Association of Art Museum Directors, 2017).

We see these issues in the excavation of an ancient shipwrecked vessel off the coast of Indonesia's Belitung Island containing about 60,000 9th-century objects from China's Tang Dynasty. After the discovery, the Indonesian government was unable to deter looting of the vessel's contents and hired Seabed Explorations, a German commercial salvage company, to excavate the site.⁵³

Archaeologists, including those of Archaeological Institute of America, however, assert that because the site was commercially mined over months, rather than methodically excavated by archeologists over a longer timeframe, a significant amount of information about the voyage and crew that could be gleaned from the site was lost.⁵⁴

The Smithsonian Institution's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery sought to present these objects in an exhibition titled *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Wind* but received blowback from the archaeological community. In an interview with National Public Radio, Kimberly Faulk of the Advisory Council on Underwater Archaeology asserts that the objects "were not excavated properly" and that such an exhibition "sends a message that treasure hunting is OK." In December 2001, the Smithsonian convened an advisory group for a two-day conference, and, following this convening, chose to cancel the exhibition⁵⁵.

One of the most recognizable seals of approval is that of the UNESCO heritage site. Only countries that have signed the World Heritage Convention, pledging to protect their natural and cultural heritage, can submit nomination proposals for properties on their territory to be considered for inclusion on this list.⁵⁶ Recognition on this list creates tensions: Inclusion on the list increases the visibility of the site and makes the site more viable and desirable as a tourist destination. The increase in tourists visiting a site offers greater opportunities to extract economic value from that site. Tourist dollars can both bolster local communities and be re-invested into maintaining and sustaining site. However, a presence on the list can also have a corrosive effect. Irresponsible tourism can cause wear to the site may be disproportionate to the repairs that the funds from said tourism would permit. The increase of visitors and gentrification can experientially transform a site in ways that alienate local communities. One such example of this tension is Luang Prabang in Northern Laos struggles to balance both economic sustainably and the externalities of tourism. Inscribed to the World Heritage list in 1995, Luang Parang boasts an architectural and artistic heritage that interweaves Lao traditional urban architecture with that of the colonial era.⁵⁷ But, following its inclusion on the

⁵³ "From Beneath, A Smithsonian Shipwreck Controversy," NPR.org, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2011/05/04/135956044/from-beneath-a-smithsonian-shipwreck-controversy>.

⁵⁴ "Smithsonian Sunken Treasure Show Poses Ethics Questions - The New York Times," accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/25/arts/design/smithsonian-sunken-treasure-show-poses-ethics-questions.html>.

⁵⁵ "Statement on 'Shipwrecked' Advisory Group Meetings, Dec. 8-9," Smithsonian Institution, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/statement-shipwrecked-advisory-group-meetings-dec-8-9>.

⁵⁶ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "UNESCO World Heritage Centre - World Heritage List Nominations," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed October 11, 2020, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/nominations/>.

⁵⁷ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Town of Luang Prabang," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed October 11, 2020, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/479/>.

list, the town became, on one hand, locked into place. Restrictions were placed on the repairs of local homes, favoring traditional materials, often more expensive and less effective than contemporary materials. Many locals relocated to the suburbs to rent their urban residencies to tourists – transforming the social composition of the townscape. *Tak Baad*, a morning alms-giving ritual, in which inhabitants provide food to monks, who reciprocate with blessings, transformed into a zoo-like atmosphere where “tourists feed the monks like they would feed animals.”⁵⁸

It’s not difficult to imagine a similar commodification by the Google Arts & Culture platform. China has seen tremendous popularization of intangible cultural heritage through numerous initiatives spearheaded not only by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism but also by leading technology companies and media platforms like Tencent and ByteDance.

Douyin, an short-video app owned by Beijing-based ByteDance Ltd., has featured 96 percent of China’s national intangible cultural heritage projects, or 1,318 items in over 48 million videos, primarily user-generated content.⁵⁹ Local Chinese governments turn to Douyin to promote their regional intangible cultural heritage, and in April of 2019, Douyin launched a campaign to raise the profile of this work on their platform.⁶⁰

Chinese technology conglomerate Tencent, (valued at \$665 B) convenes a conference, the Tencent Neo-Culture Creativity Conference to examine the role of intersection of technology and cultural heritage. The conference features such initiatives as the introduction of Shaoxing opera “skin” into the Honor of Kings online game and a partnership with Shenzhen Opera & Dance Theatre and Shenzhen Government to promote the creative performance of traditional Chinese dance.⁶¹ Tencent Video launched food documentaries such as *Breakfast in China* and *Flavorful Origins*⁶² to depict the of traditional Chinese food.

This scale of this work is staggering, but it also frames intangible cultural heritage in a new lens. In its press releases about this work, Tencent refers to these cultural elements on its platforms as ‘China’s Intellectual Property.’ This framing nods to a model of state capitalism in which intangible cultural heritage becomes an asset. As such, it implores the protection and safeguarding of this property for economic ends without explicitly acknowledging the beneficial moral externalities resulting from this practice.

The profound success of this work can’t be ignored, and neither can its potential impact on the cultural sector. It calls the cultural sector to consider the practices, traditions, and living

⁵⁸ David Berliner, “Multiple Nostalgias: The Fabric of Heritage in Luang Prabang (Lao PDR),” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18, no. 4 (2012): 775, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23321449>.

⁵⁹ Zheng Haiou and Qing Yuan, “China’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Goes Online, Gains New Vitality,” *People’s Daily Online*, June 24, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0624/c90000-9703648.html>.

⁶⁰ “Across China: Intangible Heritage Back in Vogue on Short Video Platforms - Xinhua | English.News.Cn,” accessed November 1, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/15/c_138060413.htm.

⁶¹ “UP2019: Explore New Possibilities for Cultural Heritage in the Neo-Culture Creativity Era,” accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.tencent.com/en-us/articles/2200931.html>.

⁶² Zheng Haiou and Qing Yuan, “China’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Goes Online, Gains New Vitality.”

expressions that evade commercialization and determine how the sector's specialized aptitudes might be applied to assure the safeguarding of this heritage.

In conclusion, commercial interests have proven to challenge the cultural sector. Navigating these interests requires deftness and expertise that are not part-in-parcel with subject matter expertise. The cultural sector is not positioned to insulate creative works from commercial interests, nor will it benefit by embracing those interests uncritically. Instead, the sector must be clear-eyed about this influence.

To engage in such partnerships, the cultural sector must have a lucid understanding of its values and holistically consider the economics of the sector. Further, the cultural sector must recognize potential to launder the reputation of a partnering organization. Cultural organizations must resist this undue influence.

The cultural sector must draw on its convening power – the ability to bring diverse voices into the same forum to discuss and debate these ideas and continue to understand this role. To that end, the democratizing power of technology can expose inequalities in the sector. And it is the obligation of cultural organizations actively participate in these conversations.

Finally, the cultural sector must continue to approach the commoditization and commodification of cultural goods with skepticism. The stewardship of the cultural sector may be enhanced by engagement with commercial interests, but it can't be driven by them.