A New Meaning for 'Commercial Art'

What does it say when corporations share billing with the exhibits they sponsor?

By Eleanor Heartney

Recently I was asked to testify at a Landmarks Commission meeting in New York in favor of a wall mural by the minimalist Forrest Myers. The Wall, as it is called, has been a fixture in SoHo for the past 25 years. Now it is in danger of being dismantled. One reason is the very real need for repair, but there's a second possibility evident to anyone who steps across the street to take a longer view.

The mural is on the only windowless wall along Houston Street that does not host an enormous advertising display. The neighboring building features DKNY's dizzying aerial vista of Manhattan, with a looming Statue of Liberty suggesting the fashion giant's status as a beacon of democracy. Next to it, a three-dimensional alpinist rappels down a painted mountain, demonstrating the versatility of Fila USA outerwear. And farther down are multistory paeans to Russian vodka and Solgar vitamins. This, it would seem, is public art for the '90s. What chance does a modest arrangement of aluminum girders on a blue background have against such noisy—and profitable—neighbors?

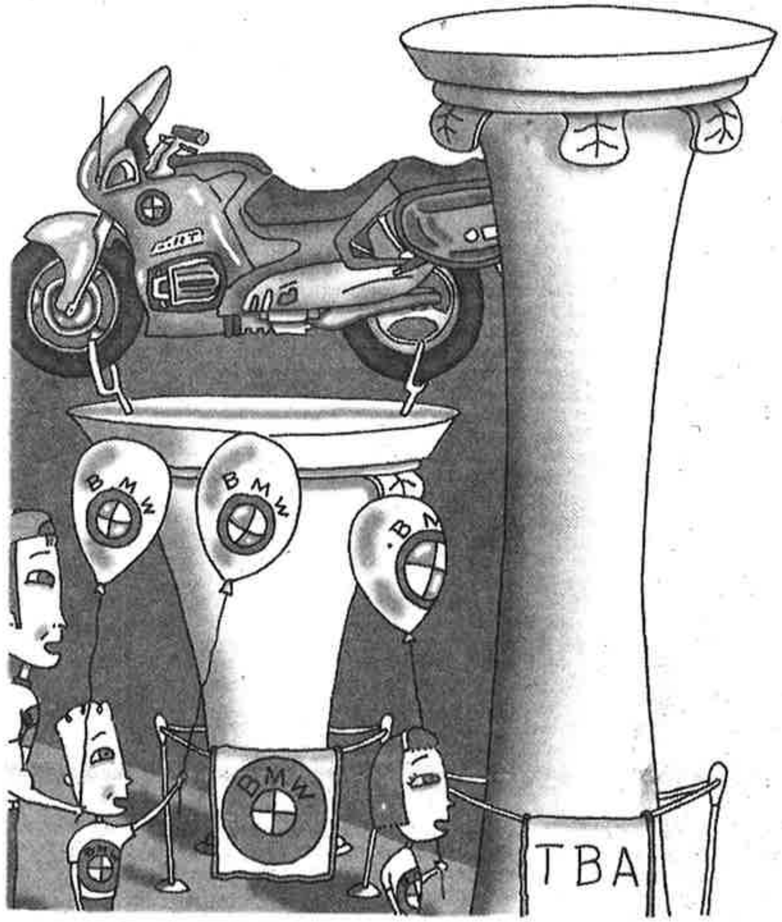
The campaign to retain a slice of non-rent-paying public art at the entry to a neighborhood known throughout the world as the historic home of America's avant-garde is emblematic of a larger battle in the arts. Much has been made by members of the art world of the threat posed by Bible-wielding conservatives who comb the award lists of the National Endowment for the Arts for evidence of what I've heard called "doctrinal defection." But more unsettling is the ease with which art has been folded into commerce in the market-driven '90s. Today, art is, more than ever before, a commodity like any other, subject to the rules of economics and the demands of the bottom line.

This was brought home to me recently by a press release that crossed my desk for an exhibition titled "The Art of the Motorcycle," sponsored by BMW, that will appear at the SoHo Guggenheim in June. The show, which "explores the motorcycle as both cultural icon and design and technical achievement," is perhaps justifiable as an exploration of the artistic aspects of contemporary industrial design. A statement from the BMW press office suggests the exhibition's real mission: "BMW is now the leading manufacturer of big motorbikes in Europe. And America is one of BMW's most important foreign markets."

Insisting the show is not a promotional stunt, a company spokesman notes that the show will contain about six BMWs, "only the ones which are really considered art."

Now, you may ask, why shouldn't museums, faced with mounting costs and diminishing public support, turn to private funding sources that are available and willing to pay? The relationship can be mutually beneficial—and even foster new audiences—as when small companies owned by women underwrite exhibitions for the National Museum of Women in the Arts or the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., solicits funding from local corporations for exhibitions that will strengthen ties to the local community. As long ago as 1939, art critic Clement Greenberg memorably noted that art has always been tied to moneyed interests by "an umbilical cord of gold."

And certainly there is nothing new about corporate support of museum exhibitions. For years, companies like Exxon Corp., Mobil Corp. and Philip Morris Cos. have been major funders of cultural institutions. But shows sponsored by Philip Morris have not included cigarettes as objects of aesthetic appreciation, nor have Exxon or Mobil demanded explicit market tie-ins. The byword was discretion—and the company's sponsorship was generally acknowledged with a notice in the catalogue and a small text at the entrance to the exhibition.



BY PAUL FISCH FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

That atmosphere has changed. Museums are taking a far more pragmatic view of their investments. Emboldened corporate sponsors now want more than a little of the reflected glory of great art. They want a clear and unambiguous promotional message.

The Guggenheim's willingness to serve temporarily as an extension of BMW's corporate showroom is but one example of this trend. Lexus stipulates in its funding contracts that institutions must showcase a car outside any exhibition that Lexus sponsors. Hungry institutions, among them the Los Angeles County Art Museum and Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, have been happy to comply. When Ford sponsored an exhibition of Latin American folk art at the Corcoran, it followed a similar logic: A Ford minivan was parked outside the museum—when not making forays into minority neighborhoods dispensing brochures about the exhibition. The august Smithsonian, bowing to contemporary realities, dropped its ban on the display of corporate logos in 1991.

That such arrangements are accepted as business as usual suggests how far we have come from the idea of an independent public culture. The museum was born in the years after the French Revolution as a monument to democracy. It affirmed the public ownership of the nation's patrimony and was based, at least in theory, in the notion of the disinterested support and dissemination of art and knowledge.

IN AMERICA, WHERE RELATIONS between public and private have always been more intertwined, many of our greatest museums were founded through the largess of industrialists such as J.P. Morgan, John Jay Rockefeller, Andrew Mellon and Andrew Carnegie. These so-called robber barons had their own agendas, not so different at times than those of Philip Morris, but the products of their vanity nevertheless helped to create our young nation's sense of common culture. Morgan set an important precedent during his term as president of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1905: He persuaded other trustees to stop the practice of keeping bequests of artworks together as discrete monuments to individual donors and instead ensured that donated works were integrated into the full collection.

In a similar spirit, Mellon presented his collection to the nation as the nucleus of a national art collection. The outcome of his gift, the National Gallery of Art, does not even bear his name. And when such art patrons went too far in the exploitation of art for private purposes, public opinion quickly reined them in. As recently as 1990, ridicule greeted Armand Hammer's creation of an art museum that would serve primarily as a monument to himself.

In Hammer's museum, visitors were met in the grand lobby by an enormous oil portrait of the founder, while the highlight of the otherwise lackluster collection was a Leonardo manuscript that had been rechristened the Codex Hammer. (After three troubled years in which the museum was dogged by legal problems with Hammer heirs and Occidental Petroleum Corp. shareholders, it was absorbed by UCLA in 1994—and the Leonardo manuscript regained its original name, the Leicester.)

There is a larger issue here. At times, it seems nearly impossible to imagine that we have common interests that rise above commerce. The American populace cheers the soaring stock market as if that were the ultimate measure of our success as a society. Have our notions of democracy and freedom become so anorexic that we can justify government action only insofar as it increases shareholder profits or supports the provision of material comforts? Is consumption our highest purpose?

Museums have become willing members of the consumer culture, as shown by the explosive growth of museum shops; by the aggressive marketing campaigns for blockbuster shows that include package travel deals, phone cards and the like; and by their increased willingness to let corporations use them for promotional purposes.

The case against public arts funding, like the cases against national health care and federally funded scientific research, holds that resources will be more efficiently allocated in the private sphere because they will follow the demands of the market. We are left to guess what we miss when we let ourselves be guided solely by profit.

What public artworks will never get made because corporate billboards and posters are so much more lucrative? What shows won't get seen? Given the choice between crowd pleasers like Picasso or Monet and shows of contemporary art with potentially unsettling social, political or economic content, it is not difficult to imagine which will receive the backing of corporate sponsors.

PEOPLE FROM COUNTRIES WHOSE governments place high value on a national arts policy are often shocked by the realities of arts funding here. Several years ago, I was talking to the organizer of a major international exhibition in South Africa, when she suddenly burst out in frustration: "Why do we have to come up with money for the Americans? You are a rich country. We would rather be giving the money to artists from places without any cultural resources."

Let others nurture the arts, we seem to be telling the world. The United States is content to export Hollywood films, running shoes and the message that the Market is King—and to let our own public culture follow the well-trod paths prescribed for us by corporate planners. Recently, the Czech Republic's president, Vaclav Havel, reviewing the problems and challenges ahead for his country's fledgling democracy, noted, "It is not true that culture is a superstructure that somehow lives a parasitic existence on a flourishing economic base. On the contrary, economic prosperity is directly dependent on the cultural environment in which a given economy operates." These words sound strange to American ears. But they contain a potent reminder that, while passivity befits a nation of consumers, it is a sorry commentary on our ideals of citizenship. ■

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