
It is not common to review books by art historians in these pages, but it is also not common for an art historian to author such an interesting and closely documented study of the influence that corporate involvement has had on the arts. Chin-tao Wu brings the perspective of a self-described “outsider” – a Taiwanese woman writing in a predominantly male and Euro-centric discipline – to her topic, with a fresh set of hard questions and a highly developed sense of skepticism. She is a careful and relentless researcher and her methodological commitment has been rewarded in a study that goes well beyond prior studies of corporate cultural influence. It is clear that she touched a number of nerves in the art world, given the difficulty she often had in retrieving what should have been public information and in the number of requests that were made to review and “approve” or “correct” her manuscript prior to publication.

Wu’s main argument is that state cultural policies have not only come to accept an increased role for corporate interests in the arts and culture, they have encouraged it, often with detrimental effect:

What is studied here is one particular facet of the enterprise culture that has engulfed both Britain and America since the Reagan and Thatcher governments first set it in train in the early 1980s . . . Never before has the corporate world in American and Britain exercised such sway over high culture, in which business involvement had previously been thought of as inappropriate, if not completely alien. Corporations had, of course, for some time been making contributions to art museums and other cultural organizations. In the 1970s, while continuing in the generally passive role of being solicited for donations, businesses had begun to be active participants in the framing and shaping of the discourse of contemporary culture. But unlike its earlier involvement, uneven in practice and limited in scope, corporate intervention in the last two decades has been ubiquitous and all-embracing (p. 2).

Corporations have taken advantage of that encouragement and have jumped in feet first causing all sorts of ripples, a careful documentation of which makes up the bulk of this study. While I would not be as quick as Wu is to characterize these changes as “privatization”, preferring, instead, to reserve that word to refer to the
In a series of closely argued chapters, Wu finds many of the results of increased corporate involvement to be dubious at best. After a brief introduction, she turns to a consideration of the history of public arts funding in the United States and Great Britain (Chapter 2). With limited space her history is a selective one, but she draws the reader’s attention to certain points that are often under-reported and under-appreciated. She carefully describes the tax laws that underpin and encourage private support for the arts in both the United States and Great Britain. (She refuses to accept the conventional idea that up until very recently Great Britain provided no incentives for charitable contributions. That view is incorrect and, to her credit, Wu puts that to rest with great clarity.)

Chapter 3 investigates the changing relationship between public support and private support. Here she notices not only changes in the public rhetoric of agency leaders, she also explores subtle changes in tax laws, the growth in the creation of public-private partnerships, new forms of public recognition for private donors, and the development of business committees in support of the arts and their close relationship to the state.

Next, Wu turns her attention to the question of the composition of boards of trustees (Chapter 4). While boards of trustees in the United States have generally been self-perpetuating boards delimited by the organization’s by laws under American laws governing nonprofit organizations, British boards have undergone a dramatic transformation, from the “great and the good” to being much more heavily reliant on corporate leaders. Wu documents how a seat on the board of a prestigious cultural organization has become a form of currency in which influential individuals speculate and which they trade for favors.

Corporate sponsorship – the topic of Chapter 5 – has traditionally attracted most of the ire of cultural purists, becoming the lightning rod for much of the discussion about corporate influence on contemporary culture. Wu uses the phrase “Museums for Rent” to great effect here, relating, among other tales, an interesting story about Philip Morris. In late 1994 the New York City Council was considering a bill that would ban smoking in virtually all public places in the city. Philip Morris quickly threatened to move its headquarters from the city, taking with it all of its art support. It enlisted the arts organizations whom it had supported in a lobbying campaign in which they were seemingly all too eager to participate.

Chapter 6 considers the growth in corporation-sponsored art awards, often in collaboration with major cultural institutions. The issues raised by these awards have not been as well documented as the issues raised by the corporate sponsorship of exhibitions, so this section is a particularly useful contribution to the literature on corporate influence.

Chapter 7 takes up the question of art exhibitions in corporate premises, most particularly the creation of branch museums in commercial office space in New York City, but also including more modest corporate exhibition spaces that may