

A close-up portrait of Laura Raicovich, a woman with wavy blonde hair and green eyes, wearing a black top and a gold necklace with various colorful charms. The background is dark and textured.

**SPOTLIGHT:  
CULTURE STRIKE  
ART AND  
MUSEUMS IN THE  
AGE OF PROTEST**

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Book by Laura Raicovich

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In the age of protest, as the author calls our time, culture and museums have come under fire, or should we add also, - got rebellious.

Laura Raicovich wrote a book by that title, published in 2021 (Verso). It is an excellent read and useful book written by an art professional blessed with considerable museum experience. Our small planet is a giant world when it comes to information. Paradoxically, our insight has become ever-increasing while, at the same time, reduced to our own “clouds” of experience, rather personalized though still relevant in range and conclusions. The author, much younger than myself has thus been unaware of a book of the same inclination and similar experiences published in The States in 1999, “Displays of Power” authored by Steven Dubin. We don’t share many of the referenced sources, especially the “museological” literature that theorises the subjects of her book. What we do share is the frustration of curators with the failed mission of museums and directors with their omnipotent Boards; these are long-time conditions for cultural production. The results are the same too, as we shall learn, but the turmoil is bigger and the pressure is rising. With adequate experience, I claim that being in love with a profession, makes up for a bunch of boring or, to be sincere, redundant readings. Choosing the project of relevance to be presented in the “Spotlight” of The Best in Heritage Conference may be left to the director’s preference, as it happened to be this time. I also concluded that the book deserves to be presented by its chapters— a challenge that, I admit, may have taken more space but the book deserves it.

By now the public protests are notorious. While though still more specific to the USA and UK but, I would dare say, spreading in parallel to the excessive privatisation that turns the world still deeper into crisis. Some-

times they are protests of museum funding, for example, the Metropolitan Museum accepting Sackler family money. At other times it is about the corporate presence on the boards, as Raicovich also elaborates in the book, especially by the example of the Whitney appointing tear gas manufacturer Warren Kanders to their board of trustees. Protests spread into demonstrations over exhibitions and artworks. Many protests called for museums to work for social change, or, as it becomes obvious in the book, there is an implied claim for a strong role of public memory in developmental strategies. Our conference is founded upon that conviction.

Raicovich’s book is highly appreciated by the buyers at Kindle store and she was briefly presented to the readers at Google Books: “As director of the Queens Museum, 2015, Laura Raicovich helped turn that New York municipal institution into a public commons for art and activism, organizing high-powered exhibitions that were also political protests. Then in January 2018, she resigned, after a dispute with the Queens Museum board and city officials became a public controversy--she had objected to the Israeli government using the museum for an event featuring vice president Mike Pence”.

## Revelations

She starts with a chapter titled “Revelations” in which she unpacks for herself and the readers the different motivations and arguments for the museum critique. She rightfully stays at the best historical (museological?) precedent of John Cotton Dana’s writings. He not only described all the inherent sins of museum institution but also implicitly predicted the fate of the entire memory sector. She also quotes a contemporary author from Turkey, Vasif Kortun, who pleads “for a better world” not by becoming political, but

reacting to the challenges as an act of “simple decency.” Museums still refrain from admitting that, like any other public service (as they are, even when they are declared private by status like in the USA) are politically committed by definition. Ms. Raicovich finds supportive arguments in the more advanced sector of public libraries and quotes the 28th Amendment project by the Brooklyn Public Library which allows the library to be “subversive by being engaged in democratic processes.” She also relies upon the inspiring power of the 60s movements and their trust in progress and so tries to provide historical context for our “age of protest”. The theme is a lucky revival coming from art and art museums.

## Art and context

In the chapter “Art and Context” the often hypocritical position of art and its museums brings a paradox to the cultural spaces which are declaratively “open to all.” Raicovich openly claims that as many as 46 000 objects from “Musée du quai Branly” could be subject to repatriation. The reality differs so much from the triumphant announcements on “art primaire,” great pomp and prestigious architecture as a much-glorified French presidents’ tradition of “grand projects.” Her book preceded Dan Hick’s “Brutish Museums,” a masterpiece upon colonialism and repatriation, of returning to the humanist consciousness, but she is finely elaborating the same paradigmatic example of Benin bronzes, the central subject to that book.

With her art background the author analyses the Whitney museum public controversy about “Open Casket” the 2016 painting by Dana Schutz, whose subject is Emmett Till, a black 14-year-old boy lynched in Mississippi in 1955. What are the rights and ethics

of representing strong identity narratives? A similar controversy happened when another artist, Sam Durant, was re-writing and re-interpreting history (what daring art sometimes does) at the Walker Art Center by representing, in part crimes against Indigenous Lakota people. In the latter case, both the museum and the artist confronted the dilemma by offering a genuine and formidable apologies to the protesting communities. Further, Raicovich discusses the postponement of Philip Guston touring exhibition (2020), by four major museums due to a reluctance to expose publics to “incendiary and toxic racial imagery in art” although this time it was about the display of images of the perpetrators of racism.

By any of the numerous examples, Ms. Raicovich affirms the increasing responsibility and delicacy of presenting the memory as the “curators fear of retribution and public failure.”

## Show me the money

In the chapter “Show me the Money” the author deals with the “market world,” which can be probably called, due to its excessive and endless privatisation the “age of the great greed” (T. Sola). Insatiable and invasive as it is, it increasingly subdues culture to prioritize interests— for the time being more so in The States than in Europe, so the book is quite an alarming testimony for colleagues overseas. Ms. Raicovich claims that these troublesome circumstances are reflected in culture, with museum values, and professional standards. She concludes that museums should be conceived of as the collective enterprises they are, denouncing the system that relies fatally upon billionaires who are (as she quotes Ocasio Cortez) “policy failures” of the system. She also adds that the autonomy and independence of museums

should be based upon extremely diversified financing. I personally prefer a wider view that is, alas, a self-disqualifying utopia, of forming the public memory into a true profession of any welfare state. Why should the way we remember be less important than public health or public education, well functioning only recently in Northern Europe, - to localize the achievement? Ms. Raicovich may however be right as it is quite unlikely that total privatisation would somehow reverse its trend and make other extremes possible. So, maybe only diversifying corrections have some chance. The Europeans found that museums should find it stimulating for the benefit of programme and its relevance if earning some third of their income "at the market".

## Unlearning, undoing, remaking

Her chapter "Unlearning, Undoing, Remaking" proposes the reform of museum practices including the very mission of museums. What has been done so far within the public memory institutions should be revised as learning and the effects undone so that harm caused does not stain present and future generations. The iconic front of the Museum of Natural History in New York City which until recently featured a towering bronze statue depicting Roosevelt riding a horse, as two nameless African and Native American men who flank him on foot.

F. D. Roosevelt, besides being President of the United States and devoted naturalist, was a white supremacist. The statue has provoked strong debate in the city, as many criticized the apparent subservience of the pair, calling the scene a symbol of racism and colonialism.

Ms. Raicovich hoped that the statue would be removed and indeed, it had, a year later. That

being just the most outstanding example, she claimed in the book that an evaluation of public statuary should be undertaken, comprising in fact that that transfer of societal memory is itself a museum process or phenomenon no matter how or where it happens is a museum experience.

## Neutrality problem

Much of the museological literature tends to either discretely question the supposed neutrality of museums, or seeks to prolong a safe haven for curatorial social apathy. So, this book, which takes a very critical stance, is welcome and provides some precious arguments for social responsibility. Again, this is more familiar to the European readers but as the "velvet totalitarianism" increases disguised as democracy, we owe the author for some arguments (denying the historical claim of R. Barthes supposing neutrality) and quoting her colleague Rebecca Solnit (who quotes Ben Bagdikian): "You cannot be objective but you can be fair." The author proposes an elegant formula for the profession: Fairness, accuracy and honesty. She finds a humble Truth always awaits her worshippers, in plain devotion, love for their users and in social responsibility. Kenneth Hudson (EMF/EMYA, one of my mentors) while writing extensively and preaching on the public value of museums, called that particular sort of relevance "an honest museum".

## Going forward

While many might add or comment on her choice for future developments, one of her arguments for a viable future hits precisely the traumatized reality of the ambitious contemporary museums. She claims: "the single, most impactful way to make changes would be to slow down...". The metricist,



quantitatively fascinated world adores big numbers and takes them seriously, preferring them to the elusive idea of quality. So the nightmare that started in the 70s or 80s of the last century seems only to swell. One might have thought we would know better by now. Popular wisdom says that more is always better, be it the number of visitors or cash-flow from the museum shop. Exhausted, frustrated curators and useless attraction-driven, selfie-motivated visitors are the visible results of increasing aggression upon culture and museums within them. It seems to be the consequence of the same mindset that turns democracy into ochlocracy, that transforms the world of work into the casino-like stock exchange serving the corporate and political elite who only live by their own rules.

## Liberation Serif

This chapter seems to me an extension of the previous one, even by its name "Liberation

Serif." An interested reader like myself could comment extensively on this subject but, interestingly, three aspects seem to be dominant. Without mentioning the huge frustration of dealing with an unrealized and therefore frustrated or slightly neurotic profession, the author sees a constructive future through its "fearlessness" (obviously in protest-quality activities) which comes "from conviction and commitment and also from abundance of love." A love for community and visitors, is clearly necessary. But then again, she might also be speaking to the love for the work itself, its norms, criteria and social responsibility because, why would she otherwise mention the need for "unionisation." I would personally add:.... together with the other public memory occupations which are acting like a dismembered army. Though the "love" which may seem a sort of 60s romanticist revival, it does not lack its proper context when Ms. Raicovich advocates that museums might be places to "rest, laugh and heal," because she continues to say that we need to "create spaces for contemplation,



connection and perhaps even for revolution.” Revolution in the “quality” of life and that of the place of the profession is what she means, I am sure.

This brave book is largely about museums but is generous enough to strike as widely as culture while, ever since its publishing, “the age” is rightfully becoming that of protest.

For the interview with Laura and all the other contents of this and previous editions head on to The Best in Heritage YouTube channel, and make sure to subscribe to stay up-to-date with the latest releases.

