

Art Agency, Partners

Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world's leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.

The Most Important Cultural Events of the Year

In a time of great change, what changed the most?



Fire at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris

By  Cristina Ruiz

editor at large, The Art Newspaper; contributing editor, The Gentlewoman; news editor, Vanity Fair on Art

Published 18 December 2019 in [Analysis](#)

This was a year of protest and activism. People took to the streets in huge numbers around the world, demanding reform and challenging those in power. [In Hong Kong](#), students led the ongoing battle for democratic concessions. [In Venezuela](#), opponents of President Nicolás Maduro staged mass gatherings. [In Chile](#), student demonstrations beginning in Santiago escalated into country-wide unrest. [In Lebanon](#), nationwide non-sectarian protests against austerity and corruption forced the resignation of the government of Prime Minister Saad Hariri. In Iran and Iraq, anti-regime unrest was brutally suppressed, leading to the deaths of hundreds of protestors. Around the world [millions of children and adults](#)—inspired by a Swedish schoolgirl—took to the streets to call for action on climate change.

As millions marched, fire and floods overwhelmed some of our most beloved cultural sites while governments looked on powerless to stop the devastation. The damage wreaked on our heritage this year reminds us that our most precious buildings are precarious and, in almost all cases, inadequately protected.

Freedom is not free

As the year approaches its end, new popular movements continue to flare. [Just a few weeks ago](#), a Facebook post created by four friends in Bologna, Italy, led to a flash-mob protest of more than 12,000 people rallying in opposition to the leader of the far-right League Party, Matteo Salvini.

What unites demonstrators from around the world is their youth; the speed at which they are mobilizing through social media; and the inspiration they appear to draw from one another. “Freedom is not free, you need to fight for it,” an anonymous Hong Kong protestor said, offering encouragement to demonstrators in other countries in a short film that was then posted by [artist Ai Weiwei](#) to his 560,000 Instagram followers.

Museums under fire, but it takes artists to force change



Protests against Kanders and his company Safariland at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Photo: @nycDSAantiwar

This wave of activism crashed through the art world with tidal force this year, sweeping museums to the frontline of a generational battle for accountability. Where these institutions once seemed unassailable repositories of our shared culture and values, they are now being challenged on virtually every aspect of their operations from the constitution of their boards and the sources of their funding, to the diversity of their work force and the protections they afford those workers as well as the art they hold and acquire and display. It remains to be seen whether the institutions will continue to respond to crises on a case-by-case basis or if they will embark on institutional overhaul.

In July, Warren Kanders, a vice chairman of the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#), resigned after [months of protests](#) over his ownership of Safariland, a company which manufactures tear gas which was found to have been used by US authorities on migrants at the US-Mexican border. Four months earlier, the activist group [Decolonize this Place](#) had launched a weekly occupation of the museum lobby calling for Kanders to step down, yet the museum appeared to be weathering the storm of demonstrations and internal museum dissent.

That was until the magazine [Artforum](#) published a [letter](#) addressed to the curators of the Whitney Biennial, written by four artists—[Korakrit Arunanondchai](#), [Meriem Bennani](#), [Nicole Eisenman](#) and [Nicholas Galanin](#)—who asked for their work to be removed from the exhibition. Citing “the museum’s continued failure to respond in any meaningful way to growing pressure from artists and activists”, the artists said they refused “further complicity with Kanders and his technologies of violence”. Shortly after three more artists ([Eddie Arroyo](#), [Agustina Woodgate](#), [Christine Sun Kim](#)) and the collective [Forensic Architecture](#) followed suit, Kanders resigned.



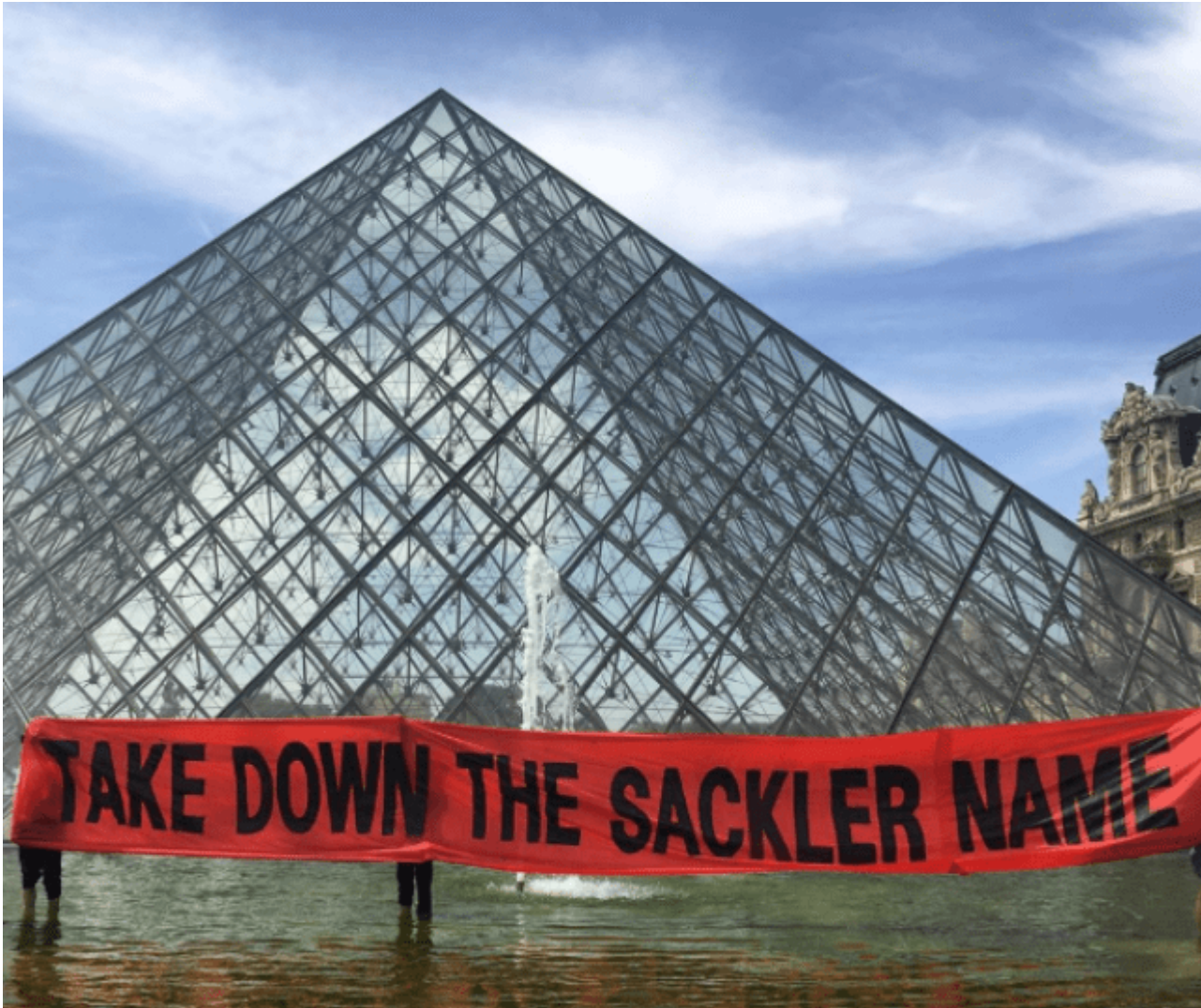
Semi-naked protesters at the National Portrait Gallery in London, calling attention to the BP Oil funding of the museum's annual portrait award. REUTERS/Henry Nicholls

The intervention of an artist proved decisive in London, too. The German film-maker [Hito Steyerl](#) asked the [Serpentine Galleries](#) to withdraw a digital work of hers from its website just days after [The Guardian](#) newspaper published an article that revealed the links between Yana Peel, the gallery's CEO, and an Israeli cyber security company. [The NSO Group](#) has been accused by human rights organizations of developing technology that is used by authoritarian regimes to track dissidents (the firm denies this, saying its products are only used to fight crime and terrorism.) A group of artists also wrote to the gallery privately to demand that action be taken. The next day Peel resigned.

Also in London, artists including [Gary Hume](#) and [Rachel Whiteread](#) called on the [National Portrait Gallery](#) to ditch the sponsorship of its annual portrait prize by the oil giant BP. When the museum closes for a three-year revamp next summer, it is widely expected to quietly divorce itself from the company. (In a statement the museum notes that "the [BP Portrait Award 2020](#) exhibition will run at the [National Portrait Gallery](#) from 21 May to 28 June 2020. We are currently considering options for our annual competitions when the building in London temporarily closes from 29 June 2020 to spring 2023.")

What these examples show is that artists are uniquely placed to force change on institutions. Despite their sometimes-progressive programming, most museums are deeply conservative. They "do not generally take the lead on issues of morality; they tend to react to changes in public opinion", is how Adrian Ellis, the director of cultural advisory firm [AEA Consulting](#), puts it. And they tend to follow the example set by their peers, because nobody wants to be the first to jump.

Sayonara to the Sacklers



Sackler P.A.I.N protest at the Louvre. Image courtesy Sackler P.A.I.N.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the sector-wide repudiation of the Sackler family. Last year, [journalists on both sides](#) of the Atlantic detailed charges made in thousands of US lawsuits against [Purdue Pharma](#) (the drugs firm owned and directed by some members of the Sackler family), and seven individual Sackler family members who are being sued personally in some states. All of them stand accused of misleading doctors and the public about the addictive properties of the opioid OxyContin to boost profits (charges that they deny). Again and again, the press questioned museums over their acceptance of Sackler money. But, by and large, institutions brushed these questions aside. It was only after one major museum turned down a grant from the Sackler Trust that others followed suit—and swiftly.

The involvement of an artist proved again to be a key turning point. The photographer [Nan Goldin](#), who became addicted to OxyContin after being prescribed the painkiller for a hand injury in 2014, began staging at major museums, with her activist group [P.A.I.N](#), performance-type demonstrations that were covered extensively by the media. She then warned the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in London that she would refuse to proceed with a proposed exhibition if the museum accepted a £1m Sackler gift.

Museums increasingly find themselves at odds with the very artists whose work they exist to promote

The NPG, which had referred the matter to its recently-constituted ethics committee, made the announcement on 19 March that it would refuse the money. Two days later, the Tate announced it would no longer accept money from the family either. The very next day, [the Guggenheim](#) in New York followed suit, as did [the Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) in May. Others continue to follow.

In this era of renewed political engagement and politically-engaged art, museums, particularly those devoted to the display of contemporary art, will increasingly find themselves at odds with the very artists whose work they exist to promote unless

they begin to factor their concerns in to every level of their institutional thinking.

Diversification? Maybe not

In May, the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) sold an untitled 1960 painting by [Mark Rothko](#) for \$50.1m at Sotheby's New York and then used the money to purchase works by [Leonora Carrington](#), Mickalene Thomas, and Lygia Clark and eight other non-white male artists. It was one of several museums to signal progressive intentions made possible by deaccessions: the Baltimore Museum of Art has been selling work by white male artists like Andy Warhol to fund acquisitions of work by underrepresented artists and recently announced it will only buy work by female-identifying artists in 2020.

Dig a little deeper into the numbers and the story is actually regressive. The number of works by women acquired by major US museums has not increased over time. In fact, it peaked a decade ago. The finding was revealed in [an exhaustive data study](#) on gender parity in museums undertaken by *In Other Words* and *artnet News* which was published in October. It found that just 11% of all acquisitions and 14% of exhibitions at 26 prominent American museums over the past decade were of work by female artists. The investigation found that a total of 260,470 works have entered the museums' permanent collections since 2008 but, of these, only 29,247 were by women.

The findings "challenge one of the most compelling narratives to have emerged within the art world in recent years: that of progressive change, with once-marginalized artists being granted more equitable representation within art institutions. Our research shows that, at least when it comes to gender parity, this story is a myth," the report concluded.

The findings were described as "heart-wrenching," by the [artist Mickalene Thomas](#).

Cultural heritage at risk in Paris...



Fire at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France on the night of 15 April

The world watched in horror on the night of 15 April as Notre Dame in Paris was [engulfed by flames](#) that destroyed the cathedral's 13th-century oak roof and 19th-century spire. [In a televised address](#) the day after the fire, President Emmanuel Macron said the church would be rebuilt and restored within five years, in time for 2024 when Paris hosts the Summer Olympics. This ambitious timeline was immediately disputed by experts who cautioned that restoration could take more than a decade; over 1,000 art historians, conservationists, architects and engineers signed a letter, published in [Le Figaro](#), which called for a "scrupulous, considered approach" to the building's restoration.

Within a week of the fire, more than €1bn had been pledged to the reconstruction effort by French corporations and billionaires (the luxury goods magnates and private museum owners [Bernard Arnault](#) and [François Pinault](#) pledged €200m and €100m respectively). In July, the French parliament passed a law vesting control of the project in a new agency led by a

retired general, [Jean-Louis Georgelin](#), which answers directly to the president.

The world watched in horror

In October, [Philippe Villeneuve](#), the chief architect in charge of the building, told *Le Parisien* newspaper that Notre Dame is still unstable. The biggest threat to the building is scaffolding that was erected on the roof in 2018 to restore the now-destroyed spire. The structure, which is secured to the corners of the cathedral, survived the blaze but the extreme heat caused its metal tubes to melt and coalesce into massive, twisted lumps of steel that are highly unstable. "This is not insignificant...there's between 200 and 300 tonnes of metal up there...it is a miracle that it still holds," Villeneuve said, adding that he hopes to complete the removal of this scaffolding by January 2020.

Another threat is the possible collapse of the cathedral's stone vaults, which were severely weakened by the flames; all the cathedral's external buttresses have been reinforced with wooden frames to prevent them crumbling in case the cathedral's stone vaults give way. At the time of writing, Notre Dame's structural condition is still not fully known. The cathedral will not be "secure" until next summer, Villeneuve added.

...Los Angeles...



A helicopter drops water as a wildfire called the Getty Fire burns on Kenter Canyon in Los Angeles, Monday, Oct. 28, 2019. (AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu)

In Los Angeles, [a wildfire](#) on 28 October came perilously close to the hilltop Getty Center and the precious works of art in its museum but its rapid extinction demonstrates how forethought combined with generous financial resources can effectively protect sites. The 1997 campus, built to the designs of architect [Richard Meier](#), is made from stone, metal and cement specifically to resist fire and smoke and it is surrounded by trees and grass which sit on top of an irrigation system connected to a million-gallon water tank; as the flames approached the center the sprinklers were activated to drench the site. Just hours later, a museum spokeswoman confirmed that the situation was "under control" and the art was "safe".

...Japan...

Just three days after the Getty fire, [Shuri Castle](#), a 15th-century royal palace turned shrine complex in the city of Naha on the Japanese island of Okinawa was devastated by flames. Three intricately carved and decorated wood buildings, including

the main temple, were totally destroyed. The governor of the island pledged to rebuild the Unesco World Heritage site and the chief cabinet secretary of the Japanese government, Yoshihide Suga, [told a news conference](#) in Tokyo that “the state will do whatever is necessary for rebuilding, including providing financial support.” The destruction is a blow to the island’s tourist industry; last year Shuri Castle was visited by 2.8 million people. The site was rebuilt extensively once before following sustained US shelling in 1945 when the complex was occupied by the Japanese army.

...and in Venice



A city worker helps a woman who decided to cross St. Mark square on a gangway, in spite of prohibition, in Venice. (AP Photo/Luca Bruno)

Seven months after the burning of Notre Dame, the city of Venice was [hit by catastrophic flooding](#), the most severe since 1966 when water levels reached 194cm above mean sea level. On the night of 12 November, water levels reached 187cm and 80% of the city was inundated. More flooding followed in subsequent days and authorities repeatedly closed St Mark’s Square, the lowest part of the city. The basilica itself was flooded as were many of the city’s other churches and nearly all the ground floors of private buildings, hotels and shops.

Experts noted that the flooding, caused by high tides and fierce winds, has most likely been exacerbated by the persistent and deliberate deepening of Venice’s canals to allow the entry of large vessels such as cruise ships, which has increased the volume of water they contain. The Italian government declared a state of emergency and pledged a speedy response to the crisis, but there is no clear way forward. Despite expenditure of €6bn (\$6.6bn), work has been stalled on a huge system of flood barriers which can be raised to protect the city since a corruption scandal in 2014. The barriers, which were announced to great fanfare 16 years ago and are now more than 90% complete, have not been maintained for the last few years and may fail in certain conditions, experts say.

The loss of a giant mind



Arguably the most influential curator of the last few decades, Enwezor died from cancer in Munich on 15 March, aged just 55.

The aim of curating is not to be a tastemaker but to “produce knowledge”—not just of art, but of the world in which it is made, [Okwui Enwezor told *The New York Times*](#) in 2002. Arguably the most influential curator of the last few decades, Enwezor died from cancer in Munich on 15 March, aged just 55. He had stepped down from his post as director of the Haus der Kunst just nine months earlier to focus on his health.

He was only the second person to direct both [Documenta](#) in Kassel, Germany (in 2002) and the [Venice Biennale](#) (in 2015), the two most prestigious contemporary art surveys in the world (the only other curator to achieve this was Harald Szeemann).

Especially in his later group shows such as Documenta, the [2012 Paris Triennale](#) and the [2015 Venice Biennale](#), Enwezor “showed up the provincialism of his Western colleagues by foregrounding the work of artists from Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the diasporas of the Black Atlantic,” as Adam Sztatman put in, [writing](#) in the *London Review of Books* after Enwezor’s death. “Okwui’s art world looked more like the world itself. But this was no occasion for self-congratulation, much less for exercises in the sterile American rhetoric of ‘inclusion’, which he disdained. His project was to decolonise the art world: not to make it more ‘diverse’ but to redistribute power inside it.

MoMA rethinks its displays

The impact of Enwezor's polyphonic view of art history on our field was evident in the reopening of the [Museum of Modern Art](#) in New York after a \$450m [renovation and expansion](#) designed by the architects [Diller, Scofidio + Renfro](#), which added 47,000 sq. feet of display space.

"The museum could be on its way to its second round of greatness," was [the verdict of Roberta Smith](#) in *The New York Times*. The curators have used the extra room to rethink the collection and its installation. Work by artists who were historically overlooked now sit in direct dialogue with some of the most acclaimed works in the museum's collection: [Faith Ringgold's American People Series #20: Die](#) (1967), a bloody disquisition on race relations during the Civil Rights era, is audaciously juxtaposed with [Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger \(O.J.\)](#) (1911), for example. Meanwhile, film and video were better integrated throughout the display, too.

The story of art MoMA articulates was once fixed around a few immovable people and places, now it is a museum that aims to be in perpetual motion. MoMA, one of the major institutions in charge of writing the canon, is now willingly involved in dismantling and expanding it.



Faith Ringgold, *American People Series #20: Die* (1967)

To return or not to return?

After sweeping promises made in 2017 and 2018, [France's plans for the restitution](#) of African objects acquired in the colonial era from its national museums appeared to stall this year: no works were returned and a major conference scheduled for April to discuss the issue was cancelled. Although a small clutch of European museums did return a handful of colonial-era objects to Africa and to indigenous communities elsewhere, there was no systematic rethink of museum policy on restitution as promised by President Macron and, for the most part, directors of major museums retreated to their entrenched positions on the issue. It was only at the very end of the year, [on 16 December](#), that France's culture minister said on a visit to Benin that 26 royal objects looted by French troops in the colonial era and now in the collection of the [Musée du Quai Branly](#) in Paris will be returned to the West African country by 2021. Before that happens, French law will need to be revised to permit the deaccessioning, although the works could be sent to Benin on loan before the lengthy legal process is complete.

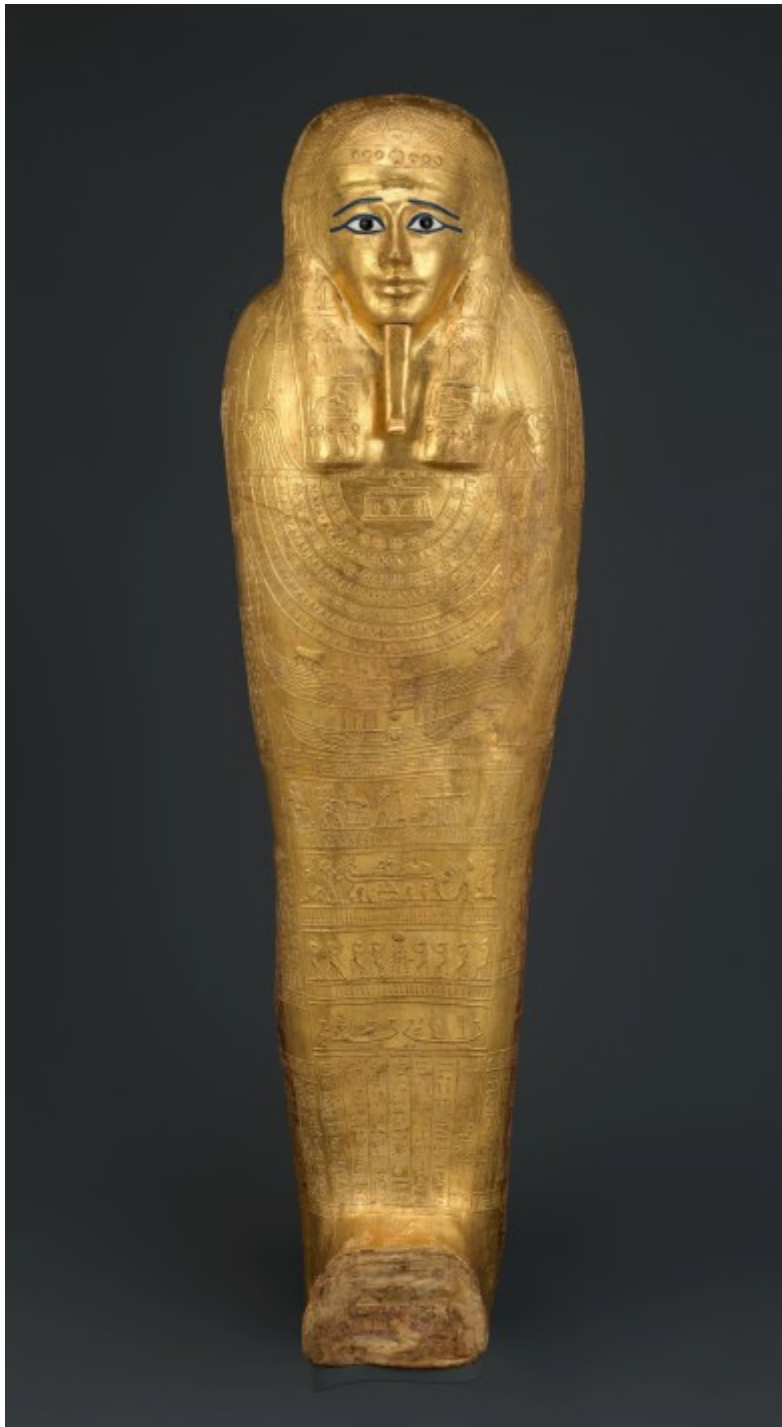
The most recent announcement follows Macron's [grandiose pledge](#), made during a visit to Burkina Faso in November 2017, that the restitution of African objects would be a priority during his term in office. "I am from a generation of French people for whom the crimes of European colonialism are undeniable and make up part of our history. I cannot accept that a large part of cultural heritage from several African countries is in France," he said. A year later, a report commissioned by the president and written by the French historian [Bénédicte Savoy](#) and the Senegalese economist [Felwine Sarr](#), recommended the permanent return to the continent of all works held by French museums which were taken in the colonial period unless it could be proven that these objects were acquired "legitimately".

Artefacts were taken in ways that are legally or morally unjustifiable

today

The controversial report sparked heated debate. But, pressure from national museum directors and Macron's own culture ministry appears to have led to the president revising his ambitious restitution plans. The government says it remains committed to returning some objects and sending others on "long-term loan" to Africa, an option which was specifically rejected by the Savoy-Sarr report as inadequate.

Meanwhile in Germany, culture ministers from the country's 16 states [agreed in March](#) to work towards the repatriation of artefacts in museum collections that were taken from indigenous peoples "in ways that are legally or morally unjustifiable today" and around €2m (\$2.2m) was set aside for provenance research for artefacts acquired during the colonial era. But it remains to be seen whether this initiative will lead to wide-spread restitution—an increasingly divisive issue in the run-up to the opening next year of the [Humboldt Forum](#), a new museum for Berlin's ethnological collections, which include around 50,000 artefacts removed from Africa during the colonial era.



The Metropolitan Museum of Art delivered the gilded Coffin of Nedjemankh, for

return to the Government of Egypt by the Manhattan District Attorney's Office, after having learned the Coffin was looted from Egypt in 2011. Image courtesy of the Creative Commons project at The Metropolitan Museum of Art collection

Elsewhere, the directors of encyclopedic museums defended their institutions' collections with varying degrees of tactlessness. In January, [Hartwig Fischer](#), the director of [the British Museum](#), an institution facing numerous long-standing restitution claims, made the tone-deaf assertion that the removal of the sculptures from the Parthenon had been "a creative act". [The V&A](#) director [Tristram Hunt](#) *wrote in [The Guardian](#)* that, for his institution, "to decolonize is to decontextualize" and pledged instead to focus on provenance research, new displays and co-operation with source countries on a range of initiatives including loans of disputed objects. He also reiterated the oft-repeated and somewhat disingenuous claim that British museums are legally barred from deaccessioning (as are French museums).

Speaking on the [In Other Words](#) podcast in September, the Metropolitan Museum director [Max Hollein](#) said the concept of the encyclopedic museum "clearly encapsulates the urgency and the importance of being able to show all different cultures in multiple ways in one place," adding that "to argue that works can only fulfill their destiny by returning them to the place where they originated, that goes completely against the whole idea of...art."

The debate is unlikely to disappear. In November the [Open Society Foundations](#) (OSF), an organization set up by billionaire businessman [George Soros](#), launched a \$15m initiative to assist African lawyers and groups in their efforts to secure the return of works taken in the colonial era. "The legacy of colonial violence has deep implications for the ways that racism and imbalances of power are perpetuated today. This isn't just about returning pieces of art, but about restoring the very essence of these cultures," [Patrick Gaspard](#), OSF president said when the project was launched.

The rise of China

[The Tate](#) in London signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) in June with the Chinese state-owned developer Shanghai Lujiazui Group, which is building the [Pudong Museum of Art](#). Under the terms of this agreement, Tate will send three exhibitions from its collection to the new institution, scheduled to open in 2021. It will also assist the fledgling institution with art and visitor management. In November, Paris's [Pompidou Centre](#) opened an [outpost in Shanghai](#) in a building designed by the British architect [David Chipperfield](#). To coincide with the opening, [the Picasso Museum](#) and the [Giacometti Foundation](#), both in Paris, also announced they will together launch a new museum in Beijing's 798 art district next June.

Meanwhile, in March, the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#) (LACMA) signed an agreement to partner with the [Yuz Museum](#) in Shanghai, founded by the Indonesian-Chinese collector [Budi Tek](#), who is seriously ill with pancreatic cancer (the partnership was first announced during a [panel discussion arranged by In Other Words](#) in Hong Kong in 2018). A new foundation will take control of Tek's collection and focus on joint exhibition and programming with LACMA. In October, [Qatar Museums](#) (QM) in Doha joined the partnership. "Together, we are experimenting with new and innovative ways to share the collections and programs from LACMA, Yuz, and QM with a larger global audience," said LACMA director Michael Govan in a statement.



Despite ongoing speculation about the impact of the protests on Art Basel Hong Kong, the organization revealed a lengthy exhibitor list

Another partnership was forged at the end of the year by [Eike Schmidt](#), the director of the [Uffizi Galleries](#) in Florence, who signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) with Vincent Liu, director of Hong Kong's Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) which operates 17 local museums. The collaboration will enable the [Hong Kong Museum of Art](#) to stage [the first Botticelli](#) exhibition in China with loans from the Florentine museum (medium and small paintings only) next September as part of a five-year exchange agreement. In return, LCSD will pay €600,000 to the Uffizi for the Botticelli show.

For the most part, the fees payable to Western institutions are not disclosed, but, these are highly profitable ventures and we'll no doubt see more of them in years to come. Curiously, Western activists who are definitively reshaping our conversations about museum power and accountability this year have remained largely silent on these new collaborations, despite increasing [evidence of the detention](#) of hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and other Muslims in the Xinjiang region of China as part of a systematic "re-education" campaign designed to make these ethnic groups disavow their religion, renounce their language and profess loyalty to the ruling Communist Party.

Meanwhile the future of Hong Kong as a cultural hub is unclear as the Chinese government continues to pull the special administrative region closer to the mainland. Despite ongoing speculation about the impact of the protests on [Art Basel Hong Kong](#), the organization revealed a lengthy exhibitor list, with more than 240 galleries signed up to participate in the event scheduled to take place between 19 and 21 March. It has also offered concessions to dealers by discounting booth fixtures, local restaurants and shipping.

Culture in the crossfire

President Donald Trump's "America First" mantra, adapted and reiterated by politicians in Europe and elsewhere, signaled a return to isolationist policies that had significant effects on the cultural sphere this year. At midnight on 31 December 2018, the US and Israel [formally quit](#) the United Nations' cultural organization, UNESCO, founded after the Second World War to foster peace, citing the organization's anti-Israel bias and its need for fundamental reform and leaving \$600m in unpaid dues. The former US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, put it bluntly: the organization is a "cesspool", she tweeted.

Back home, President Trump introduced a 15% tariff on imported Chinese products including art, antiquities, photographs, books and maps on 1 September as part of the ongoing trade war with the country. At the time of writing, China and the US were in the early phases of deescalating the conflict and negotiating a deal that would entail rollback of the tariffs.

Meanwhile, the French government vowed that the European Union [would retaliate](#) if America made good on Trump's promise to impose tariffs on around \$2.4bn of French products, following a disagreement over the taxation of major tech

companies.



A placard showing Boris Johnson at an anti-Brexit protest in London on 2nd July, 2016.

In Britain, the painful and messy process of [leaving the European Union](#) spluttered on, having collapsed two governments and caused two elections. Museum directors and arts organizations in the country warned that the repercussions of Brexit on their industries would likely be severe and could make it harder to staff their institutions, organize major exhibitions and collaborate on cross-border projects. While the Brits wait for the other shoe to drop (nobody, including the government, seems to know what will actually happen when Brexit takes effect)—the lack of clarity has made planning difficult. This, of course, has been bad for business. The overwhelming [victory of the Conservative Party](#) on 12 December revealed a fundamental reconfiguration of the country, with several traditionally working class Labour strongholds switching allegiance. With the Conservative victory, Brexit is now confirmed as inevitable. The shape, scope and consequences of this remain unclear.

In Italy, the then-culture minister, Alberto Bonisoli of the populist Five Star Movement, [announced at the start of the year](#) that he intended to rethink the reforms his predecessor had put in place—notably those which had enabled the hiring of foreign museum directors in the country for the first time, including the German art historian [Eike Schmidt](#) as head of the [Uffizi Galleries](#) in Florence. The previous administration had placed “much emphasis and importance on searching, above all, abroad,” Bonisoli [told the London Times](#) newspaper. “I think they thought they wouldn’t find sufficient talent for the job in Italy.” Now, he added, “I think you will find it”, he said echoing the [“Italians first” slogan](#) used by Matteo Salvini, leader of the far-right League party and the country’s then deputy prime minister.

The Five Star-League Party coalition government also announced it intended to block previously-approved loans of works by [Leonardo da Vinci](#) from Italian museums to the [Louvre in Paris](#) for the French museum’s major show celebrating the 500th anniversary of the artist’s death.

In ten or 15 years time, some of those millions of young people protesting will be working in the very institutions they are now challenging

But, following the collapse of the Five Star-League government in August and the reinstatement as culture minister of Dario Franceschini of the centre-left Democratic Party, foreign museum directors were confirmed in their posts in October and the loans to the Louvre were approved.

Like the now-defunct populist coalition in Italy, populist and far-right governments in Brazil, Poland and Hungary have used culture to impose conservative social values by, for example, cancelling funding for LGBT projects (Brazil); seeking to impose government control over the appointment of theatre directors (Hungary) and exerting increasing control over state-funded museums (Poland).

This year was one in which cultural values were increasingly challenged, and on all fronts—from the protests of left-wing activists to the clampdowns by conservative governments. Museums, in particular, suddenly found themselves at the heart of wider cultural battles that are dividing democracies around the world. Institutions that attempt to bury their heads in the sand and behave as before are likely in for a rude awakening.

Whatever position they take on any given issue, the choices museums make now will define them for a generation. Overwhelmingly, the calls for change are coming from social-media savvy young people around the world who are often bold, sometimes reckless, and, most of all, optimistic in their insistent belief that transformation is not only possible but imperative. It is worth remembering that, in ten or 15 years time, some of those millions of young people protesting on the streets will be working in the very same institutions they are now challenging. What happens then is anybody's guess.