



Cultural Worriers

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July 2, 2019

THE CATO INSTITUTE, “a public policy research organization dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace,” was founded in 1977 by the Koch brothers, the anarcho-capitalist economist Murray Rothbard, and former Libertarian Party national chair Ed Crane. At the time, libertarianism was still considered a fringe ideology for paranoid California eccentrics, derided even by one of their own patron saints, Ayn Rand, as a bunch of unserious “hippies of the right.” In order to bring Austrian economic theory and “minarchism” into the political mainstream, libertarianism needed a rebrand; the answer was naturally a Washington think tank, where its vision of a world of unfettered capitalist exchange could be tidily packaged into incremental policy proposals and fed to right-wing legislators.

Though Cato rejects the label “right-wing,” loudly proclaiming its independence from any political party and its commitment to fighting all efforts to expand state power, whether it comes in the form of Obamacare or the Iraq War, its relationship with the GOP has largely been more symbiotic than combative. Republicans can forgive Cato’s advocacy for, say, the decriminalization of drugs as a naïve and misplaced ideological rigidity because it comes with an economic agenda they can get behind: drastic tax cuts, the privatization of virtually all social services, and the elimination of anything that might get in the way of free trade, from environmental regulations to child labor laws. Cato denies the gravity of climate change (which it dismisses as pseudoscientific alarmism), believes in the right of business owners to discriminate on the basis of race, and ardently defends corporate personhood (“So What if Corporations Aren’t People?” reads the inadvertently hilarious title of a law review paper by Cato legal scholar Ilya Shapiro in support of the *Citizens United* decision).

Because I am an art critic and not a Republican deficit hawk or a lobbyist for big tobacco, I never expected to have a reason to visit the Cato Institute. But late last year, a different sort of proposal began circulating on the organization’s mailing lists and social media feeds: Cato was soliciting submissions from visual artists for a forthcoming exhibition, titled “Freedom: Art as the Messenger.” “We are living in an era where people are finding their combative voice but having little conversation or dialogue. The goal of this exhibition is to provide a medium for that conversation,” the call for entry read. “A full spectrum of interpretation is invited . . . addressing Freedom in all its manifestations through art.” When the exhibition was formally announced, the description took on a more polemical thrust:

Freedom means something different to every person, yet its value is a common bond between Americans. In these polarized times, *Freedom: Art as the Messenger* aims to provide a unifying

platform of civility and creativity. Artists from across the country . . . share innovative and thought-provoking perspectives on freedom and the enduring need for its protection.

For four decades, Cato's only position on the arts was "defund the NEA." Suddenly, it wanted to stake a claim to culture.

Medium Fool

"Freedom: Art as the Messenger" opened on April 11 at the Cato Institute headquarters in Northwest D.C., an odd trapezoid formed from interlocking cubes of glass and brick. When I arrived for the opening reception, I had the sense that I'd stepped into some *Twilight Zone* version of the art world where no one felt embittered, or at least a little embarrassed, about their entanglement with the market; here, the prevailing belief was that laissez-faire capitalism was not merely desirable, but fundamentally moral. This opening was not altogether unlike the dozens of staid institutional receptions I've attended in New York—there was a tasteful jazz quartet, an open bar, an impressive spread of canapes, and the guests were mostly rich people who all seemed to know each other—but at the entrance, I was offered a Cato-branded pocket Constitution along with the exhibition catalogue, and people namechecked Hayek and von Mises instead of Jacques Rancière. I eavesdropped for a while as a woman casually explained that the Paris Agreement was unnecessary since corporations could be trusted to adopt their own reasonable climate policies. I waited for someone to challenge this obvious falsehood, but instead her colleagues enthusiastically nodded in agreement.

While the artists wore name tags, the Cato-ites were all easily identifiable by their gold-plated logo lapel pins. One of them, a clean-cut fundraiser in his mid-twenties, caught me taking notes and introduced himself. Though I'd worn my best Beltway drag in an attempt to be inconspicuous, it was evidently unsuccessful: he began earnestly explaining that his kind and mine had more in common than tends to be assumed. Libertarians get lumped in with the right, he said, but there were probably all sorts of things we agreed about, like gay marriage, legalizing marijuana, or prison reform. This is true, in a superficial sense: we agree about the ends, but not the underlying rationale. Cato wants to make pot legal because they believe the state's purview is essentially limited to the protection of human life and private property; according to the Cato worldview, it is utterly consistent to believe that gay couples should be able to get married and Christian bakers should be able to refuse them a wedding cake. I told him that this was the first time I'd been to an exhibition where the majority of the attendees vocally opposed public funding for the arts. He, too, believed that the NEA was a waste of money: given a finite budget, weren't there many other social welfare programs that deserved the funding more than art? He paused for a moment, before admitting this was a straw-man: "I mean, we don't think the government should be paying for those either."

The exhibition's curators, Harriet Lesser and June Linowitz, both D.C.-area artists, received submissions from over five hundred artists, from which they chose ninety works in an eclectic mish-mash of mediums and styles. The quality, on the whole, was middling, but I've certainly seen worse in Chelsea. Many of the works on view predictably equated "freedom" with "emblems of American democracy." Several artists riffed on patriotic symbols, their distorted forms hinting at some vague, looming existential threat: the American flag was imagined as an abstract patchwork of muted colored planes with ambiently floating stars and stripes in a painting by Meryl Blinder, and as a warped reflection on metal in a photograph by Sheila Chesnow; in Diana Zipeto's *Liberty III (Nothing is Inevitable)*, the Statue of Liberty's face and crown were

fractured into pseudo-Cubist facets. Others invoked the Bill of Rights: an embroidery by Margaret Jo Feldman depicted a mouth in sequential panels sounding out the text of the Second Amendment, while Joey Mánlapaz's painting *Take One* reproduced, in exacting, anodyne detail, a row of sidewalk newspaper boxes, which the artist unironically described in a video on Cato's website as a celebration of the freedom of the press. An especially ham-fisted sculpture by Richard Foa, *Knowledge Breaks Down Walls*, took the form of a miniature brick wall tumbling down under the weight of outsized copies of the Constitution and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*.

Equally prominent were depictions of the human figure—sometimes clothed, but more often not. Alternately saccharine (a photograph of a child doing a cartwheel on the beach by Debra Moser), ponderous (Christopher Corson's *Bare Earth*, a crouching nude in pit-fired ceramic), or simply bizarre (Paul Rutz's *Holding on to Peace [Mars Quirinus]*, a painting of a heavily tattooed nude male, identified on the artist's website as a combat veteran, hanging upside-down from gymnastics rings, or a frankly grotesque portrait of six squirming newborns by Linda Lowery, who, as far as I can tell, exclusively paints babies), these works seemed to implicitly link freedom to the mere fact of individual existence, a sentiment made embarrassingly literal in Zenos Frudakis's little bronze *Maquette for Freedom*, a preparatory study for a public sculpture in Philadelphia, which depicts successive stages of a nude figure breaking free from physical confinement. But others seemed to stretch the theme to the point of incoherence: any number of works on view were blandly abstract or otherwise inscrutable in their meaning. What to make of a photorealist rendering of a bunch of Life Savers candies floating on a flat black ground, for instance, or a painting of sharks circling a vase of tulips? I actually thought the latter was pretty charming, but I never quite figured out what message about freedom I was meant to be gleaning from it. The exhibition's definition of the term turned out to be tautological: the works represented the concept of freedom because the artists had freely made them.

Freedom Slighters

When I asked Lesser in an email how she envisioned the idea of “freedom” functioning within the show, she sent me a koan: “I believe art mirrors the individual, freedom included.” Emblazoned on the wall by the entrance of the exhibition was a hackneyed quote to this effect, “Freedom is the soul of art,” attributed to Abhijit Naskar. The name didn't ring a bell; when I got home, I looked it up. Naskar was not, as I had assumed, a notable intellectual of the libertarian tradition, or even an artist; he is a “neuroscientist” in his twenties with no formal training who has self-published some thirty books in which he claims to have unlocked the scientific key to individual fulfillment and global harmony. In other words, a crackpot. But a crackpot with a gift for SEO: when you Google “quotes about art and freedom,” Naskar's appears near the top. This gaffe served as an accidental but ideal encapsulation of the vacuous sentiment at the heart of the exhibition: a reverence for “freedom” was framed as a unifying concept, something we shared as *Americans* regardless of our individual differences. We could all rally behind the importance of an abstract notion of “freedom,” even if we disagreed about what it meant; our presumed agreement that it was a sacred value worth defending meant that we had common ground.

As Cato's CEO and President Peter Goettler wrote in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Cato's definition of freedom revolves around “a belief that increasing the scope of private initiative and civil society, while limiting the role of government action, best safeguards the dignity of every individual, reduces poverty, and provides the ideal conditions for human flourishing.” Others might have a different vision, “yet regardless of party or philosophy, most

people across the political spectrum pay homage to freedom and see it as a desirable end in itself.” This, for Goettler, “is a paradox that’s endlessly fascinating. Dramatically different visions can be seen, at least in the eyes of their adherents, to vindicate freedom”—not unlike the ways in which “artists, when given the very same subject or idea to portray in their art, arrive at a dramatically broad range of representations.”

But if freedom can mean anything, it ultimately means nothing. Any acknowledgment that our conceptions of it might be—and indeed are—fundamentally incompatible was displaced onto the notion that the exhibition functioned as a platform for civil discourse, a conduit for some kind of productive dialogue in which we might, per Goettler, “cool the temperature” and engage in dignified conversations about big ideas. How the exhibition was meant to do this, exactly, was left vague: If, as the title suggested, art was a “messenger,” were we supposed to receive each work as the artist’s personal statement about freedom and weigh the pros and cons of the definition it proposed? Or were the works intended to serve as springboards for conversation with fellow viewers, in which we all first marveled at the multiplicity of “freedom” before segueing organically into debates on lofty topics like individual liberty and the role of the state? Was it that Cato’s headquarters would serve, for the duration of the exhibition, as a gathering place, some ideal model of the bourgeois public sphere along the lines of the eighteenth century coffee house, where we’d come together as free and equal citizens to rationally hash out our differences until we arrived at some meaningful consensus?

None of the above: “civility” and “conversation” were not preconditions for mutual understanding but taken as ends in themselves. People kept talking about the exhibition as a medium for the airing and discussion of divergent viewpoints, but no actual debate seemed to be happening, only lavish praise for its theoretical possibility. The week after the opening, I watched the livestream of the first of three panels in conjunction with the show, “Breaking Barriers: Art as the Messenger,” which featured curators Lesser and Linowitz, a handful of participating artists, and Cato Vice President John Samples. “Can art bridge cultures? Does it contribute to civil conversation, to challenging conversation, or both?” These were the questions the discussion was ostensibly meant to take up. Instead, the panelists simply celebrated the exhibition as an “great opportunity for conversation” and for “openness to each other”—one in which, as Linowitz described, the works “would encourage you to think about the issues as opposed to having something coming at you so strongly that you couldn’t respond.”

Few of the works in the show in fact addressed “issues” directly, taking up politics obliquely, if at all. Walls were a frequently recurring motif, a means of alluding to political topicality without having to commit to a stance on policy. Emblematic was panelist Melinda K.P. Stees’s *HOW MUCH HIGHER?*, a tall knit composition in black and white yarn depicting a rear view of a father clutching a young child in front of an insurmountable boundary. During the discussion, the artist clarified that the work had, in fact, been inspired by the separation of families at the border, but the scene is allegorical and nonspecific; one could, as Samples did, just as easily interpret it as a generalized representation of adversity rather than a response to a real and ongoing campaign of racist violence.

There were, however, a few exceptions, the most striking of which was by Shanden Simmons, a young artist from Paducah, Kentucky, exhibiting outside of his hometown for the very first time: *The Profile*, a large realist charcoal drawing depicting a violent confrontation between three white police officers and a young black man in a park at night. Shrouded in darkness, the

scene is insistently ambiguous: in the foreground, one cop holds the suspect and/or victim in a headlock, raising his fist as if readying a punch; the young man's flailing arm hovers uncomfortably close to the weapon of a second officer crouching on the ground, who's either assisting his partner in restraining a violent suspect or trying to prevent a murder. A third stands in the background, pointing his gun at this scrum, the bodies so confusingly intertwined that it's impossible to identify the aggressor. Is this a picture of freedom abused, or protected? The question was never answered, but the drawing was awarded the prize for best in show.

Indeed, the work's frustrating ambiguity was believed, by the curators, to be a feature, not a bug: *The Profile*, Lesser said during the panel, "allows the viewer to enter into the topic without overt hostility." It opens up discussion "no matter what your point of view is." In an interview on the Cato website, Simmons echoed this sentiment:

The intent behind the piece is to . . . evoke emotion, but also to ignite conversations. And good faith conversations. Between the right, the left, anyone in the middle. . . . These are important conversations that need to be happening frequently, but nuanced, and with a calmness, a patience.

It is, evidently, also a topic too important to ever acknowledge outright: the words "police brutality" and "racial profiling" remained conspicuously unspoken. Despite all the emphasis on art's capacity to spark debate, the exhibition's organizers and participants demonstrated an almost pathological unwillingness to name a single issue that we might all discuss, preferring instead empty platitudes about the inherent value of open-mindedness.

Free to Agree

What this really meant is that we—art people, leftists, anyone skeptical about the idea that freer markets produce freer societies—should be open-minded about Cato. Lesser stressed to me that the exhibition was "never intended to be a 'libertarian art show,' or even one that was overtly political in nature"; Cato made sense as a partner because freedom is "the driving force for most art and crucial to the individuality of the artwork." The two—art and freedom—"have always been allies." In fact, Linowitz's statement in the catalogue emphasized her own disagreement with Cato's politics: she initially hesitated, she wrote, when Lesser asked her to co-curate the show. Cato's willingness to let the other side be heard won her over: "By opening up its physical environment to the artwork Harriet and I selected, the Institute is expressing its respect for the individual and for freedom of expression. . . . I decided that if the Cato Institute can be open to the wide variety of expressions in the show, I can be open to the Cato Institute."

But letting the other side be heard is only a virtue if you intend to listen. In his speech at the opening reception, Goettler explained that the show had originally been proposed by Lesser—a "longtime friend of Cato"—who thought an exhibition might be the ideal way to "let people know what Cato's about, what our philosophy's about." What Cato's about, of course, is "freedom," a word he repeated so many times that the speech began to sound more like a chant. "Everyone says they want more freedom" but most people act like they're afraid of it, Goettler said: they're either "afraid to live in a world where there's a free and open economy," or afraid of "people living their lives the way they want." Not Cato: "When we say we want more freedom, we mean it." This speech performed an impressive rhetorical sleight of hand: having united us as a public under the banner of "freedom," which had been established as a value we all share regardless of how we might individually define it, Goettler claimed ownership of the

term for Cato, insisting that this was its true and legitimate defender: “*When we say we want more freedom, we mean it,*” the unstated but obvious implication being that those who disagree with *us* don’t value freedom at all.

Free as in Munch

The contemporary art world is, of course, a privileged target of right-wing scorn, cast by conservatives of all ideological stripes—red-state Evangelicals, populist bloviators on Fox News, elitist neocons at the *New Criterion*, alt-right trolls—as evidence of the coastal left’s intellectual and moral bankruptcy. “Real art”—the kind they made during the Renaissance—is beautiful, serious, and civilizing, representing the pinnacle of human creative achievement and the unparalleled greatness of the Western tradition; the stuff paraded around by the art world today is, by contrast, perverse, deskilled, stupid, pretentious, and ugly. As culture warrior Sohrab Ahmari writes in his 2016 book *The New Philistines: How Identity Politics Disfigures the Arts*:

Sincerity, formal rigor, and cohesion, the quest for truth, the sacred and the transcendent—none of these concerns, once thought timeless, is on the radar among the artists and critics who rule the contemporary art scene. These ideals have all been thrust aside to make room for the art world’s one totem, its alpha and omega: identity politics.

Variations on this theme can be found in any number of other high-minded conservative screeds with equally unhinged titles, among them Renaissance art historian and Bush-era National Endowment for the Humanities chair Bruce Cole’s *Art from the Swamp: How Washington Bureaucrats Squander Millions on Awful Art*, posthumously published in 2018; Roger Kimball’s 2004 polemic *The Rape of the Masters: How Political Correctness Sabotages Art*; and Lynne Munson’s 2000 book *Exhibitionism: Art in an Era of Intolerance* (the intolerant ones are, of course, the art-world in-crowd, who shun figurative painting—the sort of thing that real people recognize and appreciate as art—in favor of a game of shock-value one-upmanship).

Even right-wing calls to decimate the NEA have often been framed as a defense of art, whether from the left’s attempts to distort it into propaganda for communism and homosexuality, or from the deadening clutches of state bureaucracy. Bemoaning art’s entanglement in the “tender, stifling embrace” of the “federal Leviathan,” Cato’s David Boaz argues that “it is precisely because art has power, because it deals with basic human truths, that it must be kept separate from government.” Though Cato isn’t above casting aspersions on the art world’s ideological motivations: the entry on public funding for the arts in its online Encyclopedia of Libertarianism mentions the NEA’s “*de facto* entrenchment of avant-gardism” and preference for “new forms scarcely recognizable as art to the ordinary person,” claiming that “political and social activism barely disguised as art continues to receive support.”

But for all its adeptness at attacking the leftist vision of contemporary art that apparently predominates today, the right has struggled to articulate what they’d like to see replace it, let alone advance any remotely compelling alternative canon. Conservatives have, in recent years, become increasingly preoccupied with this lacuna and the need to fill it, worried about the implications of ceding the realm of culture to the left—after all, as the late Andrew Breitbart often said, “politics is downstream of culture” and, though he was mostly talking about Hollywood movies, others have echoed his call for the creation of a genuine culture of the right. These efforts, however, have rarely amounted to much: Kimball and the *New Criterion* crowd champion painters like the flimsily Caravaggesque Odd Nerdrum, whose works are bad

imitations of the Old Masters. (If a workmanlike command of classical technique is all it takes, then the world's best artists are the Chinese copyists in the Dafen oil painting village who churn out Rembrandt replicas on demand.) Sean Hannity might love the fawning painterly allegories of Trump-administration propagandist Jon McNaughton—whose closest formal analogue is, ironically, high Stalinist socialist realism, with its hysterical glorification of the leader-*cum*-savior—but the plutocrats running the show are still shopping for Warhols at Sotheby's.

Cato circumvented the vexing question of how to define its own affirmative aesthetic by claiming for libertarianism the figure of the artist itself. The underlying theme of “Freedom: Art as the Messenger” was that a natural alignment exists between artistic and libertarian priorities, attitudes and approaches to the world. “I think at least in two big ways . . . artists are our kinds of people,” Samples told the artists who shared the stage with him during the “Breaking Barriers” panel. Artists were entrepreneurs, working independently to create something of their own free will and bringing it to the market where someone else was free to decide what they thought it was worth—a pure form of free trade in which government had no business or purpose. But they also challenged the status quo, questioned received wisdoms, and proposed alternatives to stagnant social convention. This, Samples suggested, was much like what they did at Cato. “There's every reason for libertarians to be very supportive [of art],” Samples said, because they are “very much a similar kind of enterprise.” It wasn't just the artists belonged at Cato; Cato's own activity might be seen as fundamentally artistic in spirit.

When the exhibition was first announced, I spent weeks mulling over the question of why Cato had suddenly proclaimed an interest in art. The answer, it turned out, was simple: this was a way of getting new people in the door, particularly those unlikely to be drawn in by more typical Cato programming, like lectures on economic policy or privatizing infrastructure. In other words, a way to proselytize to creative types by speaking their language. It seemed to have worked: I asked Simmons, the young artist who made *The Profile*, if he knew anything about Cato before submitting to the show. “Not at all,” he said; he found the call for entry on artshow.com, a site that aggregates opportunities for artists, and thought his piece might be a good fit for the exhibition. He had been completely unaware of Cato and unfamiliar with its politics, but after his work was accepted, he began to do research and liked what he saw. Now he thinks he's probably a libertarian after all.