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The New York Times

A Right or a Privilege? Artists Speak Out on the Met Policy

By LAURA van STRAATEN

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The Metropolitan Museum's new mandatory fee goes into effect Thursday, March 1. Credit Amy Lombard for The New York Times

Artists not only make the work that is exhibited at museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but they also seek out art and historical objects in such collections as a source for inspiration and research. And so we reached out to artists for their views on the new fee policy. Here are edited excerpts from some of their responses.



Michelle Grabner Credit Kathryn Dike

1-87, Alserkal Avenue Al Quoz 1, Dubai, UAE | 568 West 25th Street New York, NY 10001 USA

www.leilahellergallery.com

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My concern is that when visitors to the Met are obligated to pay a hefty admission, they will understand their experience as [a commercial] transaction. When public museum collections and exhibitions are free, then the public feels emboldened to experiment with interpretation and meaning. It also allows for repeated viewing. Once money arbitrates the museum experience, we become consumers and not interpreters or storytellers. — **Michelle Grabner**, artist, Milwaukee, and artistic director of [FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art](#), July 14 through Sept. 30.



Ross Bleckner CreditThos Robinson/Getty Images for ACRIA

I understand that people would think the Met should be free, as I do. But in reality, a museum can only squeeze so much out of the Kochs and the Sacklers and then you're on your own. It's a symptom of a systemic problem: monetizing things that should be a right, like health care, education and, now, culture. Why wouldn't people expect culture to catch up with the rest of it all, and the mall-ing of New York City? We will get used to it, as we have so much in this last year. And that will be that. Sad but true. — **Ross Bleckner**, New York



Ai Wei Wei CreditChristopher Gregory for The New York Times

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When I lived in New York in the 1980s, economically it was very bad for me. But I would come to the Met all the time and pay a penny. And when I could afford to I paid more. When I was back in China, I would very proudly show them this pay-as-you-wish policy as an example of what was positive about the U.S., that even in this capitalistic society, there was a door, a light. To stand in front of a Van Gogh or a Jackson Pollock, or African sculpture, it gave you hope and you were not judged by your economic status but by how much you loved those works. It was a treasure, not a privilege. This new way totally ruins this belief. It's like taking the jacket off a poor person. If they do this, I will never go to the Met. Am I calling for a boycott? No. But I myself will not go. — **Ai Weiwei**, *Berlin*

The very artists we are being asked to pay to see, would in today's time be the least likely to afford the fee for entry. I can distinctly remember visiting the Pompidou and other Paris museums. As a [young] artist, I didn't have to pay. It was a shock and then a relief when the money I had cobbled together could go back in my pocket. It was not only critical as "research" for my craft; that moment empowered me as a human. It said that not only did I matter, but the role of artists also mattered. Artists generally don't occupy that space in American society. What are we valuing in this difficult political and economic moment? And for young people, especially little black and brown bodies, they are receiving more and more messages that they don't belong. — **Amanda Williams**, *Chicago, an artist and architect, will be an exhibitor at the United States pavilion at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale in May.*



Nari Ward CreditClement Pascal for The New York Times

Pay-what-you-wish, a revered tradition of accessibility that should be a source of pride, is now falling in line with limiting access to health care, restrictive immigration, environmental deregulation, and the ever-increasing economic divide. — **Nari Ward**, *New York*

This is a moment to reflect on much more than the economics of a great public institution such as the Met. The role of the museum is to reach out into the world,

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spilling out, rather than centralizing and closing itself off to various groups of people. — **Sudarshan Shetty**, *Mumbai, curator of the 2016 [Kochi-Muziris Biennale](#) in India.*

Now that this “pay what you wish” policy is being taken away, it appears markedly progressive, in retrospect. What was good about the Met’s old policy is that people had to ask themselves what something was worth to them. It could be interesting to turn this question around. Instead of blaming the Met for changing its policy, perhaps we could ask why more museums have not adopted a “pay as you wish” plan. — **John Miller**, *New York*

In Article 6 of the Met’s [mission statement](#), the museum expresses its intent to “reach out to the widest possible audience in a spirit of inclusiveness.” The new system will diminish that inclusiveness by restricting access of foreigners and out-of-state visitors unable to pay the set admission fee. — **Will Cotton**, *New York*



Dustin Yellin Credit Danny Ghitis for The New York Times

I know from our experience running a cultural organization in Red Hook that \$25 really cuts a whole part of the population out. What about the person who has never been to a place like the Met and then walks out of there with a passion to create? If the Met has an object [in storage] that is not going to be seen for 100 years, put that in private hands then use the money to let people access the other thousands of objects. — **Dustin Yellin**, *artist and founder of the cultural organization [Pioneer Works](#), Red Hook, Brooklyn*

I am not in favor of free admission, except in the case of students who universally should have access to all museums. In most countries, museums are designed and programmed to be accessible to the elite and privileged groups, which can easily afford to pay. To address why museums are not attended more by ethnically diverse backgrounds, one has to address the fundamental questions of representation, nationhood, patronage and more. — **Reza Aramesh**, *London*

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Art should be treated like a library of images or history; one goes there to learn and to become a more educated person. Can you imagine a library where you have to pay? — **Ghada Amer and Reza Farkhondeh**, *New York*



Justin Brice Guariglia CreditNathan Bajar for The New York Times

The function of art is to teach us how to think so that we can challenge assumptions and structures, so I would argue that we need radical accessibility to museums now more than ever. Charging admission only keeps these “ironic points of light,” as [Auden](#) called them, that give everyone hope, out of the hands of those that need them most. I’m a strong believer in the public museum model in the U.K., which grants free basic museum entry to everyone, local or foreign, rich or poor. — **Justin Brice Guariglia**, *New York*