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Privatising Culture

By Mute Editor

Despite the ubiquity of corporate involvement in the arts it rarely receives the attention it deserves. There remains an ingrained attitude that art and economics belong to different worlds and that they operate according to incompatible value systems. Wu argues convincingly that this attitude is based on an array of assumptions that became clearly untenable as, during the 1980s, public arts funding was systematically dismantled and replaced by a new regime of public/private initiatives. The joint ideological force of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations paved the way for further initiatives such as the renting out of museums for corporate hospitality, the shaping of taste through corporate art prizes, and the development of art collections as both vehicles for investment and as interior decoration for offices. A key part of this strategy was the relentless undermining and stripping away of any meaningful power from both the Arts Council of Great Britain and The National Endowment for the Arts in the US.

The most revelatory aspect of Wu's book is its explanation of the importance of accounting or, more topically, the concept of 'creative accounting'. Much corporate largesse is aided by advantageous tax breaks that are in essence a form of indirect public subsidy, but one that benefits only a tiny proportion of society. As long as art remains a unique source of cultural capital, corporations will turn to it for help in legitimising their profit-driven business goals. Through all this the public sector, and just as importantly the artists they service, have remained conspicuously ineffective in their opposition. Wu was outrageously stonewalled as she attempted to unravel the occult assemblies that constitute the trustee system and that controls so many of the UK's so-called public institutions. The book's only weakness is a concentration on an eighties and early-nineties model of corporate sponsorship with little comment on art's role in the cultural industries as a whole. There is also little comment on how artists have played a part in these developments and no mention of the many intermediary professionals that have emerged to service the sector. These criticisms aside, *Privatising Culture* provides an excellent primer on the corporate exploitation of public culture in the past two decades.

Chin-tao Wu // *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s* // Verso // 2002 // ISBN 1859846130 // £20.

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