

Conversation With David Gordon

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David Gordon, former director of the **Royal Academy of Arts**, in London, and the **Milwaukee Art Museum** (MAM), has taken on a new title: consultant to cultural organizations. His New York-based **Gordon Advisory**, launched in September, helps arts-related institutions find their way out of hot water, or avoid getting into it in the first place. Gordon, 68, has the right credentials: In the late 1990s he helped the Royal Academy recover from steep financial losses and devised a plan for MAM to pay down the debt it took on to build its pricey **Santiago Calatrava**-designed expansion. His current clients include the **Tate**, in London; the **Friends of the High Line**, in New York; and the **National Library of Israel**, in Jerusalem. Gordon spoke with **Sarah Douglas** about buckling down in tough times.

Museums in the U.S. are in something of a predicament.

In areas like Cleveland, Buffalo and Detroit, museums were built to match the 19th-century ambitions of those cities, which were prosperous for much of the 20th century but have since fallen on hard times. A city's decline has a tremendous effect on a museum's support system. It's really difficult to cope with that situation in a country where there isn't any national system of subsidizing the arts. That's something the stimulus package hasn't looked at. Keeping the local museums afloat could help an enormous amount in giving these cities some vitality, because art museums give a city some sparkle and hope.

How has the recession affected museums?

There have been cutbacks everywhere. But the question is, Is there now a sustainable model? Is the revenue from the endowment and all the other sources covering the reduced costs? If not, you've got a serious problem. In cities that have been suffering for a long time, getting to a position of balance is incredibly difficult, because you end up cutting into the things that bring people into the museum.

Things such as the programming?

Yes. Everybody has had to make cuts in exhibitions. But exhibitions are the way to get people into the museum. Some museum directors believe exhibitions are just a distraction, diverting resources from their true mission, which is the permanent collection. I don't believe that. Exhibitions bring a level of scholarship and attention to an artist or a period that nothing else can.

But to economize, aren't museums making more use of their permanent collections?

Yes, and for a while it's going to work. Quite a high proportion of the works in the Guggenheim's amazing Kandinsky exhibition come from its own collection, so it's not as expensive to do. But you can't carry on like this and expect to keep up the level of excitement. Not doing ambitious exhibitions is a mistake. Obviously, during a recession you have no alternative, but the aspiration should still be there.

How has the conversation about expansion changed?

Museums considering expansions have to make a really strong case now. Donors are more likely to ask different questions. Before they would say, "Who is the architect? What's it going to look like?" Now they say, "We've looked around and we see that the problem is that they have to be paid for! So when it is open, where's the money going to come from to do the programming?"

How do you stand on deaccessioning?

The position of the **American Association of Museums and the Association of Art Museum Directors** is that it is always wrong unless the funds are used to buy new art. I disagree. Suppose you have a museum in a city that has fallen on hard times and its base of support has diminished but it still has a great collection. You wish to make sure that the museum stays open six days a week, that its artworks are being conserved and that it's able to put on adventurous exhibitions, but you don't have the money to do any of this. As you cut costs, you are in particular danger of weakening the conservation program, so that the fundamental function of the museum, as a guardian of works, is jeopardized. In that circumstance, it seems wrong to say, "Well, you can't do anything that involves the art."

What can museums do about the decrease in support?

For museums that have experienced the horrific past year, thinking forward means building cushions. Museums rarely have any reserves. Ones that have endowments they can dip into should place a percentage of what they take into a rainy-day reserve. Then if they have a big exhibition that they really want to put on, instead of tearing their hair out, they can say, "This is what we've got reserves for."

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