WHO’S ON THE BOARD
A who’s who of the Art Institute’s powerful board of trustees.
by Dustin Lowman

In an art museum, the board of trustees is the governing body responsible for big decisions. Board members are appointed based on being in a unique position to propel the organization in great ways. For museums like the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC), this could mean special artistic expertise, legal insight, political connections, or — more often than not — deep, deep pockets.

Among the big decisions the trustees have adjudicated is the organization’s official stance on divestment. The AIC officially holds a non-divestment policy: “a strong presumption against divestment for social, moral, or political reasons.”

Upon learning that the board of trustees had absolute power to assess and decide on issues like divestment, we at F Newsmagazine realized that we didn’t know much about who those trustees were. So we looked into all 72 of them — who they are, what they do, how they made their bones. We sorted them by industry and slogged out some especially compelling ones. For the full list of all 72 trustees, brief summaries included, find this article on our website, fnswmagazine.com.

Additional research contributed by Olivia Camny and Leo Smith.

FINANCE
Money from money. Investors, wealth managers, consultants, and insurance execs all fall into this category.

In 1956, Gordon Segal borrowed $25,000 to open Crate & Barrel in Chicago’s Old Town. Over the next half-century, the company exploded, and Segal increasingly sold his stake in the company for an eventual total of $200 million. In 2019, Crate & Barrel’s North Michigan Avenue location (below) was made for mega-Shopping.

LEARNING: Researching the many mega-rich financiers on AIC’s board, you can easily find victims to “photography”: one of many from Wolfe-tons, meaning the facili-
tations with the beautiful families of the obscenely wealthy. When money no more, your free to do things like fit in a collage with a 16-foot long horse, or convert the top floor of your apartment estate into an art gallery (Robert Redford).

But beyond the wild and wacky is the disturbing — like Kenneth C. Griffin, a self-proclaimed “ Reagan Republican” who believes money has “beneficial influence” on the electoral process, and who donated more than $1 trillion to organizations supporting Balin Emanuel. There’s also A. Steven Crown, whose now beating helms the Red Line and real estate firm whose controversial developments threaten to permanently alter the Chicago skyline.

LAW
Money from practicing law. Attorneys fit in here.

In addition to serving on AIC’s board of trustees, Sylvia M. Neil is on the boards of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago Public Media, Chicago High School for the Arts, and is a lifetime trustee of the Grand Teton Music Festival. She is also chair-elect of the Lyric Opera of Chicago.

MEDIA
Money from content.

Founded in 1945, Ebony Media is dedicated to “telling Black stories” — or so they say. As has been the case for many media organizations in the Internet age, Ebony was purchased by a Texas private equity firm in 2016. Three years later, founder Linda Johnson Rice resigned as chairwoman from the Ebony Media board, lamenting the change in direction that the company had followed after the purchase.

PHARMA
Money from meds.

Anne Searle Bent descends from Gideon Daniel Searle who, in 1858, founded C.D. Searle & Co. In Omaha, NE, after the company the company would develop Diamox, Nutrasweet, and the first contraceptive pill. From 1977 to 1989, none other than Donald Rumsfeld served as CEO. Searle & Co. Co-CEO.

RETAIL/INDUSTRY
Money from things. Manufacturers, hoteliers, steelmakers, packaging distributors, and similar positions fall into this category.

In 1957, Ellen Sandor formed JCP, a collaborative group responsible for PPG Industries (processed sulfur-o-grams), an art form which seeks to combine photography, holographic sculptures, and computer graphics. The books on 49th St (Chicago), 1977 and a honorary doctorate (2014) from IIT. Her husband Richard is aúmeros economist and entrepreneur.

ARTS
Money (or status) from art. Artists and collectors.

In 1579, Kent Blanchard founded JCP, a collaborative group responsible for PPG Industries (processed sulfur-o-grams), an art form which seeks to combine photography, holographic sculptures, and computer graphics. The books on 49th St (Chicago), 1977 and a honorary doctorate (2014) from IIT. Her husband Richard is aúmeros economist and entrepreneur.

OTHER
Some trustees were harder to categorize, or to find.

Anita Blanchard, an OBGYN at Chicago Medicine, delivered both Sasha and Malia Obama, and is one of Michelle Obama’s closest friends. Blanchard is also on the Committee for the Preservation of the White House (2013) and the Commission on Chicago Landmarks (2011).

A few trustees escaped us, despite deep Googling, we were unable to find anything about them.

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THINGS WE LEARNED
Money makes the art world go round. It should come as no surprise that the financial world is so disproportionately represented — while becoming a trustee does not always require limitless wealth, it certainly helps. Art and commerce, while seemingly at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum, have long been bedfellows. Though, one must wonder, if the stated purpose of the trustees is to remain “responsible and vital to the culture,” does’t make sense to have 21 times as many financiers as artists on the board?

← Artless. Of the 72 trustees we looked at, only one (Ellen Sandor) is an artist (new media), and she is married to a very wealthy businessman. This is attributable to the often high price tag of board membership, and that while there’s a lot of money in the art world, not a lot of it belongs to the artists themselves.

← Out of energy. Energy tycoons play a relatively limited role on AIC’s board of trustees. While this does not mean that other board members are completely detached from the energy industry, the board’s direct affiliations are few. However, it should be noted that BP is among the Art Institute’s top million donors.

← Very significant others. Of the 72, 31 trustees are the philanthropic spouses of the ultrawealthy. There were also a significant number of heirs and extrovia-marriage to families bearing multiplegenerational wealth.

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