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ART & DESIGN

Resignations at the Bronx Museum Over a Costly International Push

By ROBIN POGREBIN AUG. 26, 2016

Like other small museums nationwide that are under pressure to build attendance and revenue, the Bronx Museum of the Arts has been trying to broaden its reach beyond its New York City borough, with a new building, a free-admission policy and ambitious projects that have international appeal, including several involving Cuba.

Now, two top governing executives at this city-owned institution say it has gone too far. In a major shake-up, they have resigned, along with four other members of the board of trustees, over the museum's leadership, saying some new projects have betrayed its local mission. They are especially worried about its plan to spend \$2.5 million to create a replica of a sculpture of José Martí, the Cuban revolutionary leader, and about an exchange of artworks with Havana.

"We are alarmed by the serious nature of these issues and by the lack of an unbiased mechanism for resolving them," said Laura Blanco, the chairwoman of the Bronx Museum's board, and Mary Beth Mandanas, the vice chairwoman, in an email on Wednesday notifying the rest of the board of

their resignations. “While many of our comments concern the executive director and her lack of transparency, we are equally focused on the broader system that has been constructed to erode the power of the board.”

Holly Block, the museum’s executive director since 2006, declined to comment and referred calls to Joshua Stein, a real estate lawyer who is also a board member.

“Some issues were raised,” Mr. Stein said in a telephone interview. “We are, as a board, working on those issues — that process is underway.

“I’m not prepared to say whether they’re valid concerns or not valid concerns,” he added, “but the board will take them seriously. To just say we’ve got these concerns and goodbye — that’s not the way to do corporate governance.”

But Ms. Blanco said she and others had raised these issues before, and that they had not been addressed. Ms. Blanco — a former entertainment executive who was born in Cuba and raised in Miami — said the first troubling development was Ms. Block’s decision last year to help host a party in the Bronx, held by local developers to promote an expensive condo project. The event was later criticized for exploiting the South Bronx’s troubled history and representing excess in one of the country’s poorest neighborhoods.

In an interview, Ms. Mandanas said it was corporate governing issues that most concerned her, namely that museum executives were not running their proposals through a recently adopted strategic plan, and that the institution appeared to be facing a deficit of an uncertain amount. “It was represented as various numbers — one was several hundred thousand, one was \$100,000 — we couldn’t get a sense,” she said. “It was a real red flag.”

In particular, some board members took issue with Wild Noise, the museum’s initiative, announced last year, to exchange works of art with the National Museum of Fine Arts in Cuba. Only in the middle of fund-raising, Ms. Blanco said, did she learn that Cuba was unlikely ever to release any artwork, for fear that it might be seized to satisfy outstanding claims from

Americans whose property had been confiscated by the Cuban government.

“Fund-raising for the Wild Noise project must be stopped immediately,” Ms. Blanco said in a memo attached to her resignation letter. “The museum is soliciting and accepting money based upon the representation that there will be an exchange of artworks from the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (MNBA) in Havana. There is no reasonable likelihood that this will happen in the near future.”

Ms. Blanco added that she was “dismayed” to see Ms. Block quoted on June 9 in a New York Times article about the program’s delay, saying that the possibility of seizure had “been a worry from the very beginning.”

Ms. Blanco said in her memo: “If I had been informed in a timely manner by the executive director of the immunity- from-seizure issue, I would have insisted that the information be shared with the board. I also would not have actively solicited donations without first disclosing that information.”

Similarly, according to Ms. Blanco, “inadequate information” was provided to the full board regarding the José Martí project, which “has ballooned” to \$2.5 million from \$1.5 million.

The museum created a Friends of José Martí Sculpture Project to present a copy of Anna Hyatt Huntington’s sculpture, which stands at the entrance to Central Park, at the Avenue of the Americas, to the Office of Historian of the City of Havana as a “symbolic gesture” that would “serve to strengthen the bridge between our two countries,” it states on the museum’s website.

Ms. Blanco’s memo said: “The statue costs \$2.5 million, while our yearly budget is approximately \$3.2 million. To say this will have no impact on our fund-raising for our actual operating budget, the continuation of free admission, the capital campaign, other exhibitions, education or even starting an endowment, seems to be overly optimistic at best.

“The life of José Martí will have little or no relevance to the local

community. While there is a substantial Latino population in the Bronx, the number of Cubans is approximately 8,000 out of a total population in excess of 1.3 million residents. This \$2.5 million statue will not even reside in the Bronx.”

Mr. Stein, in an email on Friday, said the museum, under Ms. Block’s direction, had undertaken “a full range of very local projects to very international projects,” adding that they had “helped put our museum on the map while also serving our immediate Bronx community.

“The José Martí project and Wild Noise, in particular, were undertaken with full Board support,” he said, noting that the Martí project “fits well with our interest, as an institution, in Cuban art.”

He added: “Holly Block has been an outstanding leader in these efforts. She has the full support of the Board.”

According to the museum’s website, its mission is partly to reflect “the borough’s dynamic communities.”

But some Bronx artists say the museum is selective in embracing Cuban artists, featuring those on the island while neglecting local Cubans. “Their only representation is of Cuban artists who keep their connection with the government or who live in Cuba,” said Geandy Pavón, a Cuban photographer. “Exiled artists from Cuba are not represented there.”

Bill Aguado, the former executive director of the Bronx Council on the Arts, said, “We have others here in the Bronx who represent other islands, people from the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Puerto Rico — what about us?”

Not all trustees, however, have concerns about the execution of the museum’s mission. Joan Krevlin, a board member, said in an interview that she found the resignations “perplexing,” and that she and many others fully supported the leadership of Ms. Block, the author of the 2001 book “Art Cuba: The New Generation.”

“It’s coming out of nowhere,” Ms. Krevlin said. “The way that this is being brought outside the board doesn’t quite make sense, given the kind of discussions we’re having within the board. I just don’t know why this is happening.”

The other trustees who have resigned are Jeanna Hussey, Isabella Hutchinson, Jonathan Plotkin and Jason Silverman, Ms. Blanco said.

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