

Florence Nightengale writes to Art & Labor Working Group list November, 2011:

I have a lot to say about art handling and general management, but because of my precarious place as a staff member I can only say so much and with somewhat of an oblique language.

I wish I could remain anonymous but to be involved that would be difficult as I see it. I am at risk talking about this too openly, but I have had these conversations in private with art handlers and service many times. Unless you are in it, and for many years, it takes time and experience to navigate and to understand the perspective from the underbelly of cultural enterprises.

I will say that art handlers are always having to fight for themselves. Depending upon their dynamic relationship with others that they work with and the employment, determines how they manage the ranks of gallery and institutional fiefdoms. They literally are fiefdoms. Some proprietors are more conscious than others.

I think it's really important to stay focused on the art handler's experience rather than to divert too much on the more obvious criticisms there are about market systems. The class distinction between artists represented and the artists as service staff is a whole other topic, but artists among art handling is another realm that I feel that artists need to be accountable for their own work ethic and respect for one another. I feel that this happens already but there is a competitive edge for work that is always there. This is largely because there is no symbolic form of solidarity. But even if there were any, that doesn't mean these dynamics wouldn't still be there and if not more so (hard to say). Art handling unions and the teamsters reveal a distinct sharp class contrast to the art world, because largely I don't think the employment consists of artists at all. I'd like an insiders story on this, but from my experience and hearsay knowledge, it hasn't been the case. Jobs are delineated more so and I feel that it does a disservice to these individuals even though they have their rights intact. I think in a way this could be deliberate in order to prevent middle income workers in the art world from uniting.

Keep in mind that there is the CAA (despite its own political machination), but dealers have their own means of checking themselves ethically through the ADAA at least in the US. As for workers in these situations, it is at mercy to the proprietor's business ethics, social and managerial skills.

There needs to be discussion on the variables between art handlers who work within galleries, distinct from institutions that have larger staffs, and autonomous multi-service art handling and shipping companies who in essence are also fiefdoms as mini-unions. The problem with these businesses from my standpoint is that they do not hire enough women. Maybe I am unaware of the ratio because I mostly see guys on the trucks.

Racism is an issue but I find less so compared to class and sexism in these roles (I'm not trying to pick straws here but from my perspective, this is pervasive). The division of labor among the genders is sadly consistent. Women are office staff, men are physical labor. I hover between the two. Managerial status really means knowing who to ask to obtain the whole picture of the multiple tasks and projects at hand. It's a lot managing of "yes" and "can do", and very little leeway as to "no" and "why it can't be done".

There is the people side of it. The people who own or run galleries, museums, so forth. It's personalities, desires, strategies. There is a lot that goes on with the best intentions. Some people in the art world do care about inclusive rather than exclusive. Anyone working any job has to contour up self-respect, respect for the labor and service being done. I know this is also the case in academia. I think that the strategies created in the group need to be inventive or else we will be limited with our options as artists and as workers

best, Florence