

# “The New York Film Festival, The Art of the Steal,”

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One of the worst and most tedious arguments in American film culture is the debate over the responsibility of so-called “non-fiction” filmmaking to act as reportage, a perception among some that documentaries should present facts, be balanced and tell the story in an even-handed way so that the audience can make up their mind about the complexities of the issues raised. Too often, this argument (which is being generous) focuses on the intersection of political, bureaucratic minutia and the necessary individual perspective of the filmmaker; while it is okay for, say, Chris Marker to make cultural juxtapositions in a film like *Sans Soleil* or for Werner Herzog to lay an ironic, skeptical narration over the top of found footage in *Grizzly Man*, the instant that an otherwise acceptable subjectivity meets an out of sequence fact or a passionate opinion, the shit starts hitting the fan. You can’t tell a good story without a strong point of view, without a sense of doing advocacy for both your subject and your own perspective, and so, when I am not throwing up in my mouth as people criticize documentaries for “playing with the facts”, I usually end up shaking my head in disbelief that anyone could possibly want what they’re asking for. You want to know what happened on 9/11? Read *The 9/11 Report*. You want to know what it felt like for individuals to be alive to the experience of being an American or an Afghani or an Iraqi on and in the wake of 9/11? I can suggest a documentary or two. May the twain never meet.

Don Argott’s *The Art Of The Steal*, one of an excellent crop of documentaries at this year’s New York Film Festival, does justice to the incredible story it has to tell by taking a point of view and pushing it hard. *Steal* is the tale of Dr. Albert Barnes, a American physician who invented a once-massively popular drug called Argyrol (used as an antiseptic in the eyes of newborns) and used his newfound fortune to buy an overwhelming number of modern paintings by the greatest artists of his age. The names and numbers are staggering; in his lifetime, Barnes acquired 181 paintings by Renoir, 69 by Cézanne, 59 by Matisse as well as numerous paintings by Gauguin, Goya, Manet, Modigliani, Monet, Picasso and Van Gogh. Barnes lived in Philadelphia and, as a New Deal democrat, spent many years of his life in opposition to the city’s conservative elites, including the Annenbergs (Moses and his son Walter) who owned and ran the Philadelphia Inquirer. Barnes’ personal distaste for Philadelphia society was served by his unique ideas about how to show and present his collection; housed in an intimate building on a quiet suburban street outside of the city limits, Barnes established The Barnes Foundation to maintain his principles and the integrity of his collection by following a very specific set of rules; the collection would never travel or be loaned to any museum, the collection would exist to serve the serious study of art by students (and as such, The Foundation would be an educational institution), the collection would be made available for public viewing on a limited basis. By establishing these and other strict ground rules, Barnes sought to ensure that his ideas about the study and appreciation of his collection would be maintained in perpetuity and that, even decades after his own death, the elites of Philadelphia (including The Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Philadelphia Inquirer, etc) would be forced to engage The Barnes Foundation on Barnes’ own terms.

Of course, a funny thing happened on the way to perpetuity; Barnes inevitably passed away, as did his most dedicated disciples and soon, his will was put to the test when the collection and Foundation were placed in the hands of Lincoln University, a small, historically black university to which Barnes, childless, bequeathed the stewardship of his life's passion and work. It is this moment, when institutions with competing interests intersect, that started the process whereby, over the course of several years, Barnes' original vision, principles and, well, codified demands began to be tossed aside in the name of political and financial expediency. And suddenly, through a series of seemingly small actions, the Barnes Foundation made it way rapidly down a slippery slope; the expansion of the Foundation's Board of Directors, the proposed raising of money for the purpose of providing capital improvements to the buildings in which the collection and school are housed, and most shockingly, the investment of other, larger non-profit organizations who claim to be able to help raise money for the Foundation's mission. After suffering these slights of hand, Barnes' collection has been transformed into the polar opposite of its founder's intent; the collection is getting a new home, in Philadelphia, open to the public and ready to generate piles of cash. In the end, Philadelphia, including the *Inquirer* and its constant championing of the Foundation's transformation, seem poised to stick it to the old man in the end.

The *Art Of The Steal* takes this tale and sculpts it into the stuff of great tragedy, meticulously and passionately outlining each and every transgression against Barnes' principles with a surgical precision. Even better than the details, Argott and his team use the primarily chronological narrative to mark the change in democratic ideals over the years and to ruminate on the greater issues of the competing values of art (the film states that Barnes' collection is today worth tens of billions—with a “b”— of dollars), public interest (represented here by the City of Philadelphia's desire to bring the collection to town and get that tourism money flowing) and the legal value of writing a will in the first place. Should a man's private art collection be the subject of actions that feel like a collaborative claim of eminent domain? Does the interest of the collector become irrelevant when the value of his collection is judged by the city and state to exceed his private claim to do with it what he pleases?

There may be nothing more infuriating than a parade of politicians and non-profiteers parading around as if they cared about public access to art, and Argott presents a copious number of rubes (and many more who declined to appear in the film), each of them with all of the answers, self-certain and without an ounce of conscience about what their actions might mean to poor old Dr. Barnes. But if the film were only dealing with the unconscionable crimes against art committed by public figures, it would be a lot less engaging than what it truly represents, which is an elegy for the role of the individual thinker in public life. For all of his wealth and the monetary value of his collection (and it's those numbers, those billions, and little else that attract ambitious know-nothings like bees to honey), the most dangerous and useful thing about Barnes was his belief that the economic value of his collection was subservient to his greater ideas about education and fostering the growth of new, young artists who might take spiritual inspiration from the works he amassed. Argott's film honors Barnes' big idea, that billions of dollars of masterpieces are better served in his unique setting than they could ever be in the sterile institutional environment of so many museums, and gives voice to the ideas that Dr. Barnes himself is no longer around to articulate and defend. The great tragedy is that, despite his deep desire to foster change in the way Americans and cities think about art, what was once deemed a controversial, even profane collection of paintings grew into something that was truly the envy of his enemies; a collection of great

financial worth. Things do change, but this is America, after all; what great idea stands the chance of triumph over the dollar?