

§ 1. It is Saturday night at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York. In the galleries devoted to African art, children are playing hide-and-seek while the parents sip beer from plastic cups. Some teenage girls head through the sculpture exhibition to a temporary dance floor where a DJ is playing reggae music. Watching the scene is Bryan, a young teacher from a local school. What brings him out tonight? 'I'm here for the reggae, of course,' he says. When I heard they were playing that I thought, 'I have to be there,' and obviously a lot of people feel the same way.' Besides the DJ, the museum has laid on gallery talks, a Martin Scorsese film, a puppet show and a samba band.

§ 2. The Brooklyn Museum of Art wasn't always so trendy. For decades, it put on excellent exhibitions that few came to see. Had it been over in the city's fashionable Upper East Side, of course, the museum would have been packing them in. Even when they put on dull exhibitions, New York's top museums can count on a steady stream of visitors — mostly tourists. But Brooklyn, one of New York's toughest districts, isn't on the standard tourist route. When the museum was built, it was in a wealthy suburb, but these days the surrounding streets are home to recent immigrants, mostly poor folk from the Caribbean.

§ 3. Two years ago, in an effort to revive itself, the museum appointed a new director, Arnold Lehman, who was born in Brooklyn. Lehman was convinced that the museum should forget about trying to attract visitors from the other side of town and try to appeal instead to people from the surrounding area.

§ 4. The free evening events, called 'First Saturdays', are Lehman's way of reaching out to people. The great thing for me is when you see teenage boys looking at art in the galleries without being handcuffed to their parents,' he says. What's more, the annual number of visitors to the museum has roughly doubled since the scheme was introduced. Similar institutions across the country are now calling, wanting to know how much it costs to throw a good party'. The answer, incidentally, is about \$25,000 per event. 'And worth every penny,' says Lehman.

§ 5. The real achievement of First Saturdays is more significant and profound than the increased visitor numbers suggest. Most people visit art museums because they want to have a special 'artistic' experience. The Brooklyn Museum of Art has introduced thousands of people to the idea that museum-going can be a perfectly ordinary part of their lives.

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In the past, the museum attracted few visitors because of

- 1) the negative way it was described in reviews.
- 2) the part of the city where it was located.
- 3) the limited space it had for exhibitions.