

ARTnews

New Documentary Offers Touching Portrait of Collector and Philanthropist Agnes Gund

BY MAXIMILIANO DURÓN October 9, 2020 4:43pm



A still from *Aggie*, showing Agnes Gund, right, doing a studio visit with artist Xaviera Simmons, left.

Encapsulating the life story of Agnes Gund, one of the most beloved people in the art world, is no small task, but a new documentary called *Aggie* has set out to try. Long considered one of the world's top collectors, and formerly the president of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, she more recently made headlines when she decided to sell a major artwork by Roy Lichtenstein to fund a new initiative that aims to end mass incarceration in the United States. A hero to many, she has now been memorialized by her daughter, Catherine Gund, a well-regarded documentary filmmaker who has turned her lens on her mother for a newly released feature-length film.

It's clear that Agnes Gund is a bit of an unwilling subject. Just after the opening credits, Catherine asks Agnes from offscreen, "What do you think of this film?" Agnes replies, "I hope the film will not be seen by too many people." Unfortunately for Agnes, the film is likely to have widespread appeal, no doubt because of the all-star lineup of interviews it contains, from artists like Julie Mehretu, Teresita Fernández, Glenn Ligon, John Waters, Catherine Opie, as well as Whitney Museum curator Rujeko Hockley, Ford Foundation director Darren Walker, and

Thelma Golden, the director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem. (Agnes's grandchildren also provide wonderful commentary.)

Much of the film is comprised of people singing her warranted praises, in particular the many artists with whom she has developed close relationships. "Aggie has always been there for the new kind of art. She doesn't question it. She gets behind it," says Waters, whose controversial film *Pink Flamingos* was placed in MoMA's collection thanks in part to Gund. Opie later adds, "Aggie's been a champion for myself and many, many artists."

What is clear, almost immediately, is just how hard Gund has fought for these artists—in particular artists of color. Like most museums in the U.S., MoMA has been slow to exhibit and collect works by artists of color, and some of the most important works by Black, Latinx, Asian, and queer artists in the museum's holdings can be traced to Gund in some way.

In one sequence, Gund recalls that, when the museum's painting and sculpture acquisition committee was considering buying an installation by Adrian Piper that it had just exhibited in the 1991 exhibition "Dislocation," some members didn't understand its importance, so they passed on the work at the time. Gund's attempts to push for the work's purchase ultimately failed—but they ended up being prescient. In 2018, the piece, titled *What It's Like, What It Is #3*, finally entered the MoMA collection. It was given pride of place at that year's Piper retrospective, which ranks among the biggest shows MoMA has ever done.

Aggie makes evident just how deep Gund's connections with artists run. At one point, we see her do a studio visit with artist Xaviera Simmons in New York. "A studio visit is a chance for people to come into my space and talk to me about what I'm thinking about," Simmons says. Later, Opie shoots a studio portrait of Gund in tribute to the collector.

Gund may now be considered a trailblazing figure, but the spirit that guides her work now was with her almost from the start. She grew up outside Cleveland, Ohio, the only daughter of six children. As *Aggie* makes clear, she began to understand sexism early on. Her banker father favored his sons over her. When asked what he would have thought of Agnes being president of MoMA, she replies that he would have preferred it to be one of his sons. Her resilience has even extended to her personal life—after her fourth child, her first husband refused to get a vasectomy, so she underwent tubal ligation surgery.

Still, Gund prefers not to receive too much recognition for all that she has done. In the documentary, Gund's friend, the filmmaker Abigail Disney, tells her, "It bothers me that you're so self-deprecating that you won't allow for the possibility that you've changed things, that you have made a difference." But before she can finish her sentence, Gund begins to say "No" a few times.

The crux of the film is about Agnes's philanthropy. She explains that, after she made her first major art purchase, a Henry Moore sculpture, she felt guilty about spending so much money on it that she decided she would donate it to a museum, "in order to assuage my guilt of having had this money"—hence how she ultimately got involved with MoMA.

In 1977, after reading in the *New York Times* that the city's public school system planned to get rid of art classes as a result of budget cuts, she started the nonprofit Studio in the School, which brings in artists to work with schoolchildren. To date, the program has taught over 100 million children. She has been active in funding charities to support those living with HIV/AIDS and even joined PFLAG, a prominent LGBTQ advocacy group, during the '80s.

She has remained current as an activist, and in 2017, she launched the Art for Justice Fund, which plans to distribute all of its assets—a total of \$100 million, garnered from the sale of a prized Lichtenstein—by 2022. Seeing Ava DuVernay's documentary *13th* made her realize that she needed to help end the prison-industrial complex, which Gund believes is the successor to slavery in the U.S.

In *Aggie*, Mellon Foundation director Elizabeth Alexander addresses Gund's activism, saying, "I think what Aggie did that was very deep was that she laid bare wealth and privilege. Most people who have it pretend like they don't have it. She said, 'I have this, and I want it to go to work and be so much bigger.'"

Aggie is most penetrating as a film by making such a larger-than-life figure into someone you can sit and have a conversation with, using the kind of access that only a family member can get. At one point, Gund offers a tour of her luxe Manhattan home, which contains some of her most beloved artworks. She turns to the camera briefly and says, "I love to live with things because I can see the works in different lights at different times of day."