

Newfields responds after art critic calls it the 'greatest travesty in the art world in 2017'

[Domenica Bongiovanni](#) Updated 10:05 p.m. ET Jan. 4, 2018

The Indianapolis Museum of Art needed a way to increase use of its outdoor exhibition spaces and encourage more interaction with art if it wanted to ensure its viability. So officials created a new name for the 152-acre campus: Newfields. Wochit

A recent piece on The Atlantic sister website [CityLab](#) has called the changes at Newfields — [the new campus name for the Indianapolis Museum of Art](#) — the "greatest travesty in the art world in 2017."

Staff writer [Kriston Capps](#), who also is an art critic for the Washington City Paper, said the museum has put its art collection on the back burner to spotlight its grounds and Instagram-feeding experiences like the inaugural "Winterlights," [an evening garden stroll with more than 1 million lights](#).

"Where the Indianapolis Museum of Art strove to challenge its audience, Newfields pats their heads. Every step in the museum's recent evolution has been a cynical one, reflecting a condescending view of the local Indianapolis viewers and international museum-goers ... Why not raze the building and put up an enormous trampoline in its place?"

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In October, Newfields became the name of the entire campus, which includes the IMA, The Virginia B. Fairbanks Art & Nature Park, The Garden and Lilly House. The shifts, informed by market research funded by a Lilly Endowment grant, aim to draw in more people to sustain the museum, which has been in debt, for the long haul.

"Somewhere along the way, Indianapolis forgot that museums are meant to be the house of the few, not the house of the many; museums are cultural treasuries, not amusement parks," Capps said in the Dec. 29 piece, titled ["Your Entire City Is an Instagram Playground Now."](#)

"(Museum CEO Charles) Venable has turned a grand encyclopedic museum into a cheap Midwestern boardwalk."



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The new Winterlights exhibit at the outdoor Newfields section of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Thursday, Nov. 16, 2017. The exhibit formally opens on Sunday and runs through January 7, and tickets are at a variety of prices from free for little kids, to \$25 for non-member adults at the door. *(Photo: Robert Scheer/IndyStar)*

Venable disagrees, and in response, he announced plans to hire two new curators and outlined art and design exhibitions for 2018 and 2019.

- **Collecting Contemporaries: Recent Acquisitions from Koch and Wolf (May 4-Nov. 4).** Works on paper — by Andy Warhol, Alex Katz and John Cage, among others — gifted to the museum by Kay Koch and Joan and Walter Wolf.
- **Summer Wonderland: Spectacular Creatures (June 1-Aug. 26).** Cracking Art's colorful animals created from regenerated plastic treat viewers to memorable sights and a lesson on the environment.
- **Natural Abstraction: Brett Weston and His Contemporaries (June**

- 15, 2018-March 17, 2019).** Black and white photographs from Weston, Aaron Siskind, Ansel Adams and his father Edward Weston.
- **Design Gallery reopening (July 27).** Reinstallation of the contemporary design collection. An additional Design Lab will let visitors design prototypes, try furniture and take classes on 3D printing.
 - **Clowes Portraits (Summer 2019).** With Rembrandt's early self-portrait and other masterpieces from the European art collection of George H.A. Clowes.
 - **Bes-Ben: The Mad Hatter of Chicago (April 20-Jan. 6, 2019).** Benjamin B. Green-Field's designs used everyday objects, fake cigarettes, plastic vegetables and more. Celebrities and wealthy women wore the hats.
 - **700 Years of Japanese painting at the IMA (Fall 2019).** With works from the Edo period (1600-1868) by major artists and schools of Japanese painting. This comes at the end of a year that explores the world of Japan at Newfields, including plant collections in the garden, food, fashion and influence on decorative arts in the 19th century.

With the IMA, park and other assets, Newfields must pave a way that traditional museums and parks haven't, Venable said. He also pointed out that it has had its botanical garden and outdoor performance spaces for decades.

"Newfields is a new brand for a new type of an organization," he said. "Our mission is to create exceptional experiences with art and nature and the nature part is all of a sudden being revealed in pretty serious and very positive, successful ways.

"I still think we've got a little ways to go before more people understand that we're all of these things and that we still are a great art museum doing

programs and hiring curators and acquiring art, but some people are caught off guard, like, 'Well, what are they doing on their grounds?'"

Capps noted the decline of curators as well. The museum laid off employees in 2009 and again in 2013, shortly after Venable took the helm. The recession and museum's indebted financial state contributed to the cuts, which included curatorial jobs. There were also [high-profile voluntary exits](#) by curators who retired or moved on to new opportunities.

A few left to become directors elsewhere, and Venable said those moves weren't surprising. For example, Scott Stulen, curator of audience experiences and performance, left in 2016 to become director of the Phillbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa, Okla.

An expansion in 2005 and 2006 sent the museum into more than \$100 million of debt, and the recession caused it to draw too much off of its endowment, which, as of November, was about \$330.3 million, according to Newfields. After the last \$20 million pay down in August, the debt is now about \$81 million. Capps acknowledged the debt but said the changes have "come at the cost of the museum's soul," he wrote.

Venable will announce the hires of two more curators — one for American art and another for contemporary art — late this spring.



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[Winterlights](#) has sold almost double the tickets — 70,000 — of its initial projected goal, according to numbers provided by Newfields. Forty-seven percent of the visitors hadn't been to the institution in the past 12 months, according to early research, and the event played backdrop to 42 wedding engagements. It began Nov. 19 and runs through Jan. 7.

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