Not far from the Gardner Museum sits the Boston Common, site of an important moment in American spiritual life, for it was there that Ralph Waldo Emerson had the famous epiphany reported in the first chapter of his first book, *Nature* (1836): “Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. . . . Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.”

His “mean egotism” disappeared, he says, but I take it that egotism of some other sort remained, for these three sentences alone contain the word “I” six times. It is a solitary, individualist epiphany, an image of one consciousness being touched by the divine without apparent mediation of community or church.

Thus it is no accident, I think, that Emerson placed himself on the common, and a “bare” one at that, with snow puddles and clouds, for the common in America was imagined as the place where a “common man” or “common woman” might walk or where all who walked became “common” by their presence there. That is to say, the common in America was exactly not the commons

of Europe. A common in America was a republican space where rich and poor could meet with equal privilege; the commons in Europe was an aristocratic space where rich and poor met and enacted their differences.

I will say more about what that means before I am done, but first let me come back to that near neighbor of the Boston Common, the Gardner Museum, for it is the Museum that has set me to thinking about the commons. Lee Mingwei’s project at the Museum responds to Isabella Stewart Gardner’s original enterprise, which was to create a space that was at once her private home (she lived on the fourth floor) and a building open “for the education and enjoyment of the public forever” (as her will declared). Now, a century after the Museum was chartered, Lee Mingwei offers us a chance to interrogate that original impulse and reimagine what it might mean. Why might you invite strangers into your home to see your art? Why might you turn your home into a public space? And what is a “public” space in this case? Is a museum like a common pasture where we, the public, come to graze on beauty? How far are we from the Boston Common, and how near?

For my answer I propose to offer a short reading of Mrs. Gardner’s will, probated July 23, 1924, in the Suffolk County courthouse, for it is the will that sets the terms by which the Gardner Museum has operated for the last seventy-five years and will operate, if Mrs. Gardner has her way, “forever.”

“I, Isabella Stewart Gardner . . . do make and publish this my last will.” Thus does our text begin, and it is a beginning that we may do well to pause over. Isabella Stewart was born in New York in 1840; she married John Lowell Gardner in 1860 and moved to Boston. Both families were rich (the Stewarts: Irish linen, mining; the Gardners: sailing ships, the China trade, railroads, mines, mills), but more than that, they had a certain pride of ancestry, the Stewarts especially. A man named Morris Carter is named in the will as the first director of the Museum (and given the fourth floor apartment, a month’s vacation, and two servants); he was also Mrs. Gardner’s first biographer, and in his biography, he has this to say:

Various genealogists assert that the Stewarts were descended from King Fergus I, a contemporary of Alexander the Great. Mrs. Gardner quite naturally had a cult for Mary Stuart and for the martyred Charles I. She possessed a few precious
Stuart relics: fragments of silk and lace, said to be parts of dresses once worn by Mary Stuart. . . . The death of Charles of England, king and martyr, was occasionally—not regularly—commemorated at Fenway Court [as the Museum is called] by a little supper for a few enthusiasts, and an intimate, romantic service in the chapel.2

Some odd touches occur in that report—the genealogists “assert,” the interest in Mary Stuart is “quite natural,” the lace is “said to be” royal—that make one suppose the facts may have suffered a good admixture of fantasy. But whatever the true roots, we have the true fruit: this Isabella had a fondness for royalty. She was, above all, attracted to anything connected to royal Isabellas. The Museum collection contains images of, or materials associated with, Queen Isabella Católica of Spain, Isabella Clara Eugenia the Archduchess, Isabella of Portugal, and Isabella d’Este (whom Bernard Berenson called, as he urged a purchase upon his patron, “the greatest and most fascinating lady of the Renaissance—your worthy precursor and patron saint”).

Mrs. Gardner was also very much interested in the Stuart kings. Ornaments throughout Fenway Court show the Scottish thistle and white rose. She was a member of the Order of the White Rose, a society inspired by Sir Walter Scott’s romantic versions of history. When Berenson was persuading her to buy Titian’s Rape of Europa, he reminded her that it had once been meant to be a gift to Charles I, a Stuart king, and had ended up in the collection of Lord Darnley, also a Stuart.4 “It would be poetic justice,” Berenson wrote, “that a picture once intended for a Stewart [sic] should at last rest in the hand of a Stewart.”5

And, if we are trying to imagine what it means to offer the paintings in Fenway Court to “the public forever,” then we should pause to wonder what it means that the death of Charles I was remembered in that space. In Walden, Henry Thoreau says that the newspapers mostly have no news to report; to his mind, the last bit of real news was dated 1649—the year that Cromwell and the

4. Ibid., 157.
5. Bernard Berenson as quoted in ibid., 158.
Puritans beheaded Charles I. That is to say, for some Americans the death of Charles I began the movement that led to the Great Republic and its experiment in democracy.

It seems odd at first, then, to find someone born a generation after Thoreau mourning the death of that hapless seventeenth-century monarch. It is less odd if one revisits the changes that American civic culture underwent in the late nineteenth century. To give too brief a summary of a complicated history: before the American Civil War, the rhetoric of “the Great Republic” held public displays of wealth and class in check; after the Civil War, that rhetoric lost its power, and the rich came forward, much at ease displaying themselves as not just rich, but deservedly so, naturally so.

That change is well reflected in the emergence of the country’s elite cultural institutions. The years between 1870 and 1890 brought the creation of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Metropolitan Opera Association, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Cincinnati Museum of Art, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and more. On the whole, these institutions were all created privately. Their styles and programs reflected, and offered “to the public,” the tastes of America’s financial and social elites. Mrs. Gardner’s Fenway Court belongs to their era. Perhaps it was the greater privacy (she was the Museum’s sole benefactor) that allowed her to be more direct and—what word? playful? confrontational?—in appropriating royalist trappings to present her work to Puritan Boston.

If we come back to the will and move beyond “Isabella Stewart,” we find the late Mrs. Gardner giving a lot of money to worthy causes, relatives, and friends (“to Pablo Casals, I give my violoncello [sic] now in his possession”), after which she names seven people, all men, to be the trustees of the Museum. She establishes a fund for its operation ($1,200,000), and she lays down a number of constraints under which the Museum must operate.

She says, for example, that the director “shall . . . charge and collect a fee from visitors to the Museum, as in my opinion the greatest good to the public and the community will be attained by charging such fee.” She says, “I believe that the interest in the

6. I am indebted to Neil Harris for this list and to his 1995 lecture to Grantmakers in the Arts, “Public Subsidies and American Art.”
Museum and its value to the public will best be sustained and furthered by opening it only on certain days and also by charging an admission fee.”

Before Mrs. Gardner’s death, the Museum was open to the public, but not regularly. In 1903, the first year the public were admitted, the entrance fee was one dollar. I have had a look at the Statistical Abstract of the United States for the year 1904 and find there that, if you were importing goods into the United States, one dollar would buy thirty pounds of herring, forty pounds of rice, seventeen gallons of wine, eleven pounds of coffee, or six pounds of tea. Multiply any of those by current prices, and you will see that a 1903 dollar was not an insignificant sum. To open the Museum “only on certain days” and to charge such a fee means that, if Mrs. Gardner’s original Museum was a commons, it was a gated—or stinted, to employ a British term—commons.

That is what the commons were in England under the Stuart kings, and before. The commons in premodern England were not like American public parks or the Boston Common—open more or less freely to all who might want to use them. They were highly stinted, meaning that while by custom commoners had a set of use rights in the common, the use rights had clear limits. A village family might, for example, have the right to let their cattle graze on the common, but only during one part of the year and only so many cattle as they could maintain on their own land during the rest of the year. Or they might have the right to cut rushes on the common, but only between Christmas and Candlemas. Or they might have the right to cut the branches of trees on the common, but only up to a certain height and only after November 10. Or they might have the right to cut furze—a thorny, evergreen shrub—but only so much as can be carried on one’s back and only to heat one’s own house.7

Not only were rights in common stinted, they brought obligations with them. Under the manorial system in medieval England, for example, commoners had to help the lord of the manor plough his fields and reap his crop; they had to maintain his hedges; they had to bring him honey, eggs, and chickens; and so forth. On the


A Perspective View of Part of the Commons, engraved by Sidney L. Smith, 1902 after a watercolor by Christian Remick in 1768. Courtesy of the Boston Athenaeum.
other hand, the lord’s rights were also stinted; above all, he could not abridge the use rights held by commoners. His land was not wholly his; it was, rather, a place for staging the mutual duties of premodern aristocracy.

So, what kind of space was Mrs. Gardner’s Museum in 1903? If she charged one dollar at the door and opened it only “certain days,” it was not a public commons but, at best, a gated one. On the other hand, when it was open, the gate was pure money, meaning that there was none of the reciprocal rights and duties that marked a manorial commons. Neither feudal nor republican, it was at best some strange hybrid of the two, a point I shall return to when we have finished with our reading of the will.

The fee and the limited hours are the least of the constraints Mrs. Gardner suggests for her Museum. Here is the document’s key clause: “If at any time the Trustees . . . shall place for exhibition in the Museum . . . any pictures or works of art other than such as I or [the Museum] own . . ., or if they shall at any time change the general disposition or arrangement of any articles . . ., then I give the said land, Museum, pictures, [etcetera] . . ., to the President and Fellows of Harvard College, in trust to sell.” That is to say, the will stipulates that nothing may be added to the collection, nothing may be sold, and nothing may be moved—or else.

A “last will” embodies a unique action, an action after the death of the actor. And there must be two sorts of “last wills”: those that emphasize the “last” and those that emphasize the “will.” The former give in order to give up. They announce a bequest—ten thousand dollars to Aunt Harriet—and that’s the end of it. Aunt Harriet is now the actor, and she may burn the money, or buy hats, or invest in sensible bonds. Isabella Stewart Gardner’s will is not much about giving up. She makes a few outright bequests, yes, but she also demands that a memorial mass be said annually on her birthday in the little chapel on the third floor of Fenway Court, and more to the point, she demands that her Museum stay as it was on the day she died. You may not like the way she hung that Rembrandt self-portrait, but if you move it, the lawyers from Harvard will show up with appraisers from Sotheby’s in tow.

What does it mean, this constraint of all change, this freezing of the space?
I wonder, first of all, if the controlling impulse doesn’t have to do with those seven men appointed to be trustees. Mrs. Gardner wants it clear that they are there to guard her creation, not to revise it. The Gardner is what is called a “house museum,” and in this case, a woman’s house, especially (Mrs. Gardner did not begin to build Fenway Court until her husband had died). The building, its contents, and its interior arrangement are her work of art. During her lifetime, her will, her agency, was in the architecture, the purchases, the arrangement, the lighting, and so forth. Each room is a kind of painting with paintings. We would rightly protest if someone rearranged a collage by Picasso; Mrs. Gardner’s will protests in advance any attempt to rearrange the collage of Fenway Court.

We have, then, a woman suspicious of what the men will do when left alone but, nonetheless, obliged to turn the house keys over to them—which is to say, Mrs. Gardner may have anticipated tension between her work and the men she left to oversee it, but she was not a feminist in the modern style. She took no real interest in two of the defining political movements of her lifetime, the abolition of slavery and the fight for woman’s suffrage. She was a Victorian with a royalist sensibility and private money. If we are looking for a nineteenth-century image of woman’s power to match with Mrs. Gardner, we should probably go to Queen Victoria herself, rather than to any suffragette. The motto of Mrs. Gardner’s Museum is “c’est mon plaisir,” which means not only “it is my pleasure,” but also “it is my will”; and her “last will” spells out the regal pleasure of an American aristocrat interested in preserving her own image on her own terms.

Mrs. Gardner had a long-standing and somewhat theatrical concern with how she was seen, and when. At the time that Fenway Court was built, she had a tablet placed over the main entrance inscribed, “The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in the Fenway MDCCC,” but she immediately covered this with a marble slab. The cover came off when she died. She similarly, John Singer Sargent’s famous 1888 painting of Mrs. Gardner, depicting her as a sensuous goddess complete with Renaissance halo, was off-limits to the public until she died. It sits in the Gothic room on the third floor of the Museum so that, with her death, “the public” gets to travel

8. Carter, op. cit., 188.
through the house museum, room after room, until—having finally come to the little chapel where her birth is celebrated every April 14—one enters the final room to find the creator herself revealed.

Mrs. Gardner managed, then, to have her death prompt a new revelation of both her name and image. But this concern with how and when her creations were seen was a part of her style during her lifetime as well. There is a striking story about the 1902 preparations for the opening of Fenway Court. At that time the building contained a magnificent, high-ceilinged music room. Mrs. Gardner wanted to test the acoustics of the room with a live audience, but she also did not want anyone to see it before the opening. What to do? She invited for a concert at Fenway Court an audience of children from the Perkins Institution for the Blind.\(^9\)

Beyond the breathtaking sense that the world and its inhabitants were there for her use, we have here an earlier version of the will's marked concern that her work be seen on her terms or not at all. Nor was the opening of Fenway Court the first time she had displayed her will in that regard. Mrs. Gardner had lived in a house at 152 Beacon Street in Boston before she moved to Fenway Court in 1904. Before she sold the Beacon Street house, she had all the interior woodwork and fireplaces removed, installing them wherever possible in her apartment at Fenway Court. Moreover, the new owner of 152 Beacon Street got possession of the house only on condition that he tear it down, build a new one, and change the number to 150. As Morris Carter remarks, “Thus Mrs. Gardner, who craved continuity and the perpetuation of her personality, transported to the new location whatever intimate association she could and obliterated what must be left behind.”\(^10\)

Mrs. Gardner’s will offers the trustees the same options when it comes to the Museum: perpetuation or obliteration. Her creation must remain solidly in the condition she left it, or it must be liquefied—“convert[ed] . . . into money,” the will says, and the money given away. If it works as she wanted it to work, then, the will is a Medusa’s head made of legal language. The collection itself suggests the analogy: the focal point of Fenway Court, the art object in the center of the center courtyard, is a Roman mosaic of the Medusa’s head. In Greek mythology, the Medusa was one of the

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\(^9\) Ibid., 196–7.
\(^10\) Ibid., 175.
three Gorgons, but the only mortal among them. Her serpent hair and staring eyes literally petrified anyone who looked at them. Works of art usually depict her head alone, for Perseus managed to cut it off (cunningly looking at her in a mirror, not directly), thereafter using its powers for his own ends. He used the severed head to petrify Atlas, for example; later he gave the head to Athena as a gift, and she put it in the center of her shield. The Medusa’s head, then, is the head of a dead woman, but death has not brought an end to her powers. At Fenway Court it sits as if on Athena’s shield to remind trustees and visitors alike that Mrs. Gardner had a last will meant to last, a will to set her creation forever in stone.

Petrification or liquefaction: these are the options the will allows, and they bring us to one of that document’s final details. Having said that if anyone tries to change the Museum it should be turned into money and the money given to Harvard, she adds in closing that in doing so, the art should be sold “in Paris, France.” This is a nice touch, a last farewell to Puritan Boston, and another hint at how Mrs. Gardner imagined what she had created.

Like many of the rich museum builders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Mrs. Gardner primarily assembled her creation from imported European art. In doing so, she was representative of American culture’s broader post-Civil War shift away from republican simplicity and toward a New World version of aristocratic privilege. One might rightly say it was a shift toward class hierarchy, but those involved saw it differently. They saw it as opening America up to the kind of gentility, right behavior, and high art that republican government had trouble producing.

Nineteenth-century Americans traveling in Europe often came home convinced that a republican nation was incapable of producing magnificent art, magnificent buildings, or even well-behaved people. Here is George Hilliard, for example, writing in 1853, after a trip to Italy: “To bring a vast design to its ripe completion, requires perhaps the steady uniformity of monarchical institutions.” Or here an American doctor, Walter Channing, who spent a summer in Europe and then wrote a book to tell his countrymen how the common people of France, upon entering the Louvre, “put the shoes

from off their feet, for they were on holy ground." The French, Channing decided, knew how to behave because they had the Louvre; Americans had no Louvre and, thus, no manners.

In this way a talismanic civilizing influence was imputed to European art, and when that art was displayed in an American museum, "for the education and enjoyment of the public forever," it was with that influence in mind. William James, after attending the opening of the Museum, wrote Mrs. Gardner a thank-you note claiming that "the aesthetic perfection of all things . . . seemed to have a peculiar effect on the company, making them quiet and docile and self-forgetful and kind. . . . It was a very extra-ordinary and wonderful moral influence. . . . Quite in the line of a Gospel miracle!" I actually don’t know how much Mrs. Gardner herself saw the work that way. Maybe she used such rhetoric when it was useful to her and ignored it when it wasn’t. Maybe William James was just being polite. Nonetheless, the will does seem to draw a line in the Atlantic and dare the trustees to cross it. If we take that seriously, then the collection can be imagined as a sort of "abduction of Europa" in the service of civilizing a new continent, and Mrs. Gardner’s mention of Paris her way of saying that the talismans should be left in place to work their magic or else be carried back from whence they came and converted into coin. The trustees, of course, have chosen the former option. I imagine that at every meeting they cast their eyes upon the Medusa head so as to stiffen their resolve once more toward the task of keeping Mrs. Gardner’s will in place.

In the summer of 1846, Henry Thoreau spent a night in jail for having refused to pay taxes he imagined going toward the support of slavery and a war with Mexico. "When I came out of prison," he later wrote, "I did not perceive that great changes had taken place on the common . . . ; and yet a change had to my eyes come over the scene." In fantasy, at least, Thoreau stands on the common and sees both the state and his neighbors with new eyes. He sees that the people of the town "did not greatly propose to do right"; the state, he sees, "did not know its friends from its foes."

Like the story out of Emerson with which I opened, Thoreau’s "common moment" is not exactly democratic in its beginnings. Both

15. Ibid., 238.
moments might better be called autocratic, for each centers on a single man, a single self standing on the common and seeing the world freshly. The solitude of such epiphanies is only part of the story, however, for the fantasy of nineteenth-century social-spiritual life was that self-reliant individuals, given eyes to see, would see their way toward democracy. Thus did Walt Whitman believe, for example, that realized individuals would become democratic citizens, each of us being guided by a natural law of “adhesiveness or love, that fuses, ties and aggregates . . . , fraternizing all.”16

These words come from “Democratic Vistas,” an essay Whitman wrote after the Civil War because the vistas he imagined and hoped for were not the vistas he saw developing around him. After the Civil War, it became more and more apparent that no way existed to guarantee the fancied alchemy by which the common “I” is transmuted into the democratic or republican “we.” It could as easily become a new version of the royal “we.” Rich and poor may walk together on the commons in America, but if the point is that New World spaces are less rule-bound than their Old World antecedents, then ironically, the point is also that no single “vista” of America has privilege of place. Who is to say which is the real American way—a lavish display of entrepreneurial wealth or a Thoreauvian voluntary poverty? And who is to say whether contact with the divine should be mediated by the church, its traditions and its art, as Mrs. Gardner clearly preferred, or be face-to-face as Emerson hoped?

Mrs. Gardner had her own sense of how we are to see the true and the beautiful (not to mention the neighbors and the state), and in the land of free enterprise, the vista she offers is no less American than Whitman’s or Emerson’s. It even has its own version of adhesiveness, a New World version of community derived from precisely those traditions—“feudal and ecclesiastic”—that Whitman hoped we would abandon.17 Fenway Court is a particularly American mix of entrepreneurial wealth and the spirit of the Stuart kings. It memorializes the sort of American individualism belonging to merchant princes and princesses, not to transcendentalist loners.

17. Ibid., 364.
It is animated not so much by the spirit of New England’s “bare common[s]” as by the ghost of a commons older and more feudal. I say “ghost” because that commons can never return in fact, the merchant princes having had to kill it before they themselves could come to power (true aristocrats never having stooped to trade). Our hostess at the Gardner Museum may have carried a torch for Charles I, and dressed her work in Mary Stuart’s silks, but the power that made that dressing up possible did not come down from King Fergus I, it came from New World railroads, imported linen, and an iron mine outside Uniontown, Pennsylvania.

This is not to say we have come to the end of the story. Luckily, we never shall. The double meaning of Mrs. Gardner’s *plaisir* means that visitors will always enter who find pleasures and learning not stinted by the Order of the White Rose. The lady had good lawyers, but it is very hard to command the future after death, even should they let you write your will in stone. When Perseus came to the Medusa’s home in the Land of the Hyperboreans, he found her among the rain-worn shapes of the men and wild beasts she had petrified. Mark that “rain-worn”: stone itself weathers away over time. The will may well control future trustees, but it cannot really control the space. Fenway Court was built on the Fenway in Boston, and the Fenway was created from a fen, a bog, a swamp, which is why the mosaic of the Medusa’s head, originally installed level with the surrounding courtyard, has sunk four and a half feet. Thieves, too, have broken in and removed paintings without waking those Harvard lawyers. Moreover, Mrs. Gardner’s will omitted a few parts of the building, including the rooms at the back, where Lee Mingwei has organized a project that may prompt us toward new, twenty-first-century answers to the questions I posed at the outset. What does it mean to invite someone into your home to see your art? What sort of space is created when you quit that home and leave it to the public?

Lewis Hyde