

New York City's mayor threatens Brooklyn Museum

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28 September 1999

In a serious attack on democratic rights, New York City's Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has threatened to cut off funding to the Brooklyn Museum if it goes ahead with a planned art exhibit scheduled to open October 2. The exhibit, entitled *Sensation*, features the works of a number of controversial British artists.

Giuliani asserted that he found a portrait of a black Virgin Mary splattered with elephant dung and photographs of genitalia to be the most offensive. Other works that outraged the mayor include a bust of a man made from his own frozen blood, the use of dead pigs and cows sliced from head to tail in a tank of formaldehyde, and a painting depicting the murder of children that took place in England in the 1960s.

The Brooklyn Museum, the second largest in New York City, receives \$7.2 million per year from the city for operating expenses, about one third of its annual \$23 million budget. The city also has also provided another \$20 million for the institution's capital improvements.

The mayor's legal staff is attempting to take advantage of a decision by the museum to prevent children from attending the exhibit unless accompanied by an adult. Giuliani has called this decision a violation of the institution's lease with the city, which calls for its open access to the public. He is using this as an excuse to justify firing the museum's current board of trustees and replacing it with one of his own choosing.

The Republican mayor has called the scheduled show an exercise in Catholic-bashing and "sick stuff." He declared, "I'm not going to have any compunction about putting them [the museum] out of business." His deputy mayor explained that the museum currently receives its money from the city on a first-of-the-month basis. He asserted that these checks would not be forthcoming unless the exhibit is canceled.

The museum's director, Arnold L. Lehman, stated that he hoped to change Mr. Giuliani's mind. He wants to explain to the mayor that the painter of the Virgin Mary is himself a Catholic, who is inspired by African traditions that regard elephant dung as a symbol of regeneration. In defending the planned show, he stated that "it is part of a museum's job to support the right of artists to express themselves freely." In response to the mayor's attack on the limiting of access, Lehman said, "First we are told how vile and degenerate the exhibition is, and now we are being expected to open it up to children?"

The mayor, in defending his decision, stated that "If somebody wants to do that privately, well that's what the First Amendment [freedom of speech] is all about. I mean you can be offended by it and upset by it, and you don't have to go see it. But to have the government subsidize something like that is outrageous."

In other words, Giuliani is saying is that the government should only subsidize those works of art with which it approves, or at least doesn't find objectionable. Right-wing politicians, such as North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, have been witch-hunting artists and arts organizations for more than a decade. The budget of the federal government's National Endowment to the Arts has been slashed to the bone and its willingness to fund difficult or oppositional art has been largely diminished.

The fact of this attack taking place in New York City has considerable significance. Giuliani's short-term political calculations no doubt play a major role. He is expected to run for the US Senate, and he is making an effort to appeal to those more conservative layers in other parts of the state who view the city as a cesspool of sin and corruption, with the mayor, whatever his political affiliation, as its spokesman.

Beyond that, it is an expression of the rightward lurch in the American political establishment that Giuliani carries out such an act of philistine bullying with some confidence that he will face only scattered criticism and resistance. The formerly liberal elite in New York City has an ever-decreasing interest in the defense of democratic rights. Living in their oases of wealth within a city blighted by poverty and decay, these layers of New York society are not likely to rally to the defense of “controversial” artists under attack. It is significant that the directors of other museums in the city, while privately complaining to the press about Giuliani's action, have not summoned up the courage to issue a single public protest. All this is taking place in the city that likes to term itself the “world capital of art.”

The attack on artistic freedom does not take place in a vacuum. Giuliani has led a concerted attack on the working class and poor since taking office. He has placed more than 250,000 welfare recipients on the Work Experience Program, which compels them to do civil service work for their checks. In this way, he has managed to cut the number of unionized city workers—who were doing the same exact work, but with higher wages and benefits—by the thousands. He has openly defended every act of police brutality and murder, and condemned any attempt to rein in the police. He has pushed for the privatization of the hospitals and the public school system, and has ridiculed the idea that the education of the city's poor children is underfunded.

These economic attacks on the masses and those to come require a hostility to anything that goes beyond the moral and social dictates of the ruling elite. The fact that the show in question does not represent any serious challenge to the existing social order is perhaps even more to the point. Insofar as Giuliani and company succeed in suppressing works like this, it portends the threat to more serious and thoughtful artistic endeavors.



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