

Strong opposition in New York to Mayor Giuliani's attack on art exhibit

Alan Whyte
5 October 1999

The Brooklyn Museum of Art enjoyed record attendance over the weekend as thousands came to see "Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection," the exhibit that New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has targeted for attack. People, most of them young, began lining up early Saturday morning waiting for the museum to open its doors at 11:00 a.m. The lines were long throughout the day, and movement was slow, as the large crowd was obliged to pass through metal detectors before being allowed to enter. The museum has received threats of violence. According to its spokesmen, more than 9,000 people attended the exhibit Saturday, a record for any single day in the institution's 166-year existence. On Sunday, more than 4,000 attended.

The size of the crowd seeking entrance to the museum stood in stark contrast to the 100 or so demonstrators protesting the exhibit, organized by the Catholic League and other groups. A handful of animal rights' activists were also on hand protesting Damien Hirst's works, which make use of dead animals. One protester held up a sign that read, "Hitler Was Right When He Got Rid Of Degenerate Art."

Giuliani and New York's Catholic hierarchy have raised a storm in particular about Chris Ofili's painting "The Holy Virgin Mary" (1996), which makes use of elephant dung. The painter, British-born and a Catholic, is of Nigerian descent and makes use of the material in reference to his African ancestry.

Many of those who attended the exhibit this weekend were making a statement in opposition to Giuliani's attempt at state censorship and in defense of artistic freedom. A demonstration Friday night in front of the museum, organized by the New York Civil Liberties Union and People for the American Way, drew well over a thousand people, although the daily press

reported that only a few hundred attended.

A number of those standing on line to see the exhibit expressed their opinions to a reporter from the *World Socialist Web Site*. Joe, 40, a graduate student in education, commented, "The issue here is freedom. This is not a dictatorship. It is supposed to be a democracy. This is typical Giuliani. He wants to impose his will on everyone else. He doesn't want to pay for this art, but I don't want to pay for nuclear weapons. If he can choose where tax money goes, why can't I?"

Louiza Patsis, 28, a free lance writer, said, "Not everyone agrees with all the art that is produced, but no one has the right of censorship. Giuliani doesn't like this exhibit, and the one painting of the Virgin Mary in particular, but that doesn't give him the right to close down the whole museum. I understand that elephant dung means fertility in certain African cultures. What is wrong with that? The art in this exhibit is not hurting anyone. It is not calling on anyone to hurt or kill this or that ethnic group. Giuliani has no right to censor it."

Philip Korshak, 32, a bar manager, told the WSW, "This is grandstanding of the lowest kind. The mayor can't retroactively pull funding because he doesn't like this exhibit. The funding of the arts exists not for him, but for the people. I find it distressing that Giuliani is a making a mockery of his role as a public servant. Instead, he wants to manipulate public opinion to serve his political ambitions and ethical ideas."

All indications suggest that there is significant opposition to Giuliani's attack on freedom of expression. To a certain extent this is a cumulative hostility, which has built up in response to Giuliani's sustained attacks on the working class and the poor and on democratic rights. A poll organized by the *New York Daily News* found that two out of every three New

Yorkers defend the right of the museum to proceed with the exhibit. The figures are even higher amongst the youngest age group questioned. Among 18- to 29-years-olds, three out of four responded by stating their support for the museum's freedom of expression. Even amongst Catholics, whom the mayor claims to be protecting against the supposedly sacrilegious painting, a majority side with the museum's right to artistic expression. A national poll conducted by the First Amendment Center and the University of Connecticut produced essentially the same results.

The public reaction has not slowed the mayor's legal assault on the museum. In addition to cutting off city funds to the institution, he is going ahead with eviction proceedings. He has accused the museum of violating its lease and state law by allegedly colluding with Christie's, the auction house, which owns the collection on display, to inflate the value of the art. This charge is part of a lawsuit filed by the city in State Supreme Court seeking to foreclose on the museum and take control of the board of directors. There is a certain irony to this charge; if public attention has been focused on the art work, and its value has increased as a result, this is almost exclusively Giuliani's work.

Christie's has issued a statement asserting that the charges leveled against it are untrue and absurd. The auction house notes that it has a long history of sponsoring exhibits in the United States and internationally, and that nothing in the exhibit is for sale.

Furthermore, the practice of exhibiting private collections in public art museums is quite common. The president of the Association of Art Museum Directors, with 175 museums as members observed, "Maybe they [city officials] are not aware of how important collectors are in the appreciation of art.... Typically ... a third to a half of a museum's collection is given by private collectors. Sometimes more."

Earlier the mayor argued that the museum had violated its lease with the city, which dates back to 1893, by not permitting children access without an adult companion. The museum then decided to allow children to attend without such accompaniment.

The museum's attorney, Floyd Abrams, commented, "It seems to me that every day, the city comes up with a new pretextual claim. Now they have come up with another argument. Each and every one of them is

nothing more or less than further pretext in an effort to punish the museum for the exercise of its First Amendment rights."

The museum has amended its suit in federal court to include the charge that the mayor should be personally liable for his legal attack on the first amendment and the constitutionally protected rights of the museum. It also claims that the mayor, by singling out the Brooklyn Museum for victimization, is violating the constitutional guarantee of equal protection before the law. It further accuses the city of violating the state constitution and the city charter by refusing to release moneys that have already been allotted. The case is now in front of Judge Nina Gershon of the Federal District Court in Brooklyn.

Another attack on the arts community took place last Wednesday when police arrested well-known SoHo gallery owner Mary Boone, for allegedly distributing bullets as publicity for a new show. Boone says that detectives grabbed her by the hair and threw her against a wall. She was held in jail for 26 hours. The gallery owner faces a \$2,000 fine and a year in jail if convicted. She explained that she didn't know that the bullets offered by the sculptor, Tom Sachs, were real. Ms. Boone said, "I think it's more than a coincidence that I was arrested 24 hours before the 'Sensation' show was to open. It's clear that they're trying to make a statement. It's a Giuliani witch-hunt. They're trying to protect New York from its art."

Texas Governor and Republican presidential hopeful George W. Bush, campaigning in New York this week, chimed in with his support for Giuliani's attempt to close down the "Sensation" exhibit. Not to be outdone, Elizabeth Dole, another would-be Republican presidential candidate, suggested that the incident highlighted the need to end public funding for the arts. She urged that the federal government's National Endowment for the Arts be closed down.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact