

New attack on artistic freedom and democratic rights

Detroit museum shuts down exhibit

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Last Friday afternoon officials at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), at the behest of the museum's new director Graham Beal, closed down the first part of an exhibit entitled "Art Until Now," on the grounds that it might cause offense. The display, the first of twelve week-long shows conceived and curated by artist Jef Bourgeois, had opened Wednesday afternoon and was scheduled to run through Sunday. The aim of the 12-part exhibit was to explore issues in twentieth century art.

The first installation, "Van Gogh's Ear," included, among other pieces, "some of the difficult art" of the 1990s, according to Bourgeois. "Art reflects the times and this is an 'in-your-face,' 'push-the-buttons' culture." The exhibit contained references to some of the art-world controversies of the past decade, including Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ," a Bathtub Jesus with a doll wearing a condom and pieces by some of the "Young British Artists" whose work caused such a stir recently at the Brooklyn Museum. The show also included a piece with a racial slur in the title.

The exhibit, intended to commemorate the end of the century, had been some two years in the planning. Bourgeois, best known for his work in video, played a leading role in establishing a museum of contemporary art in Pontiac. In a telephone conversation he explained that DIA officials had visited his gallery and liked what they saw. "They made the proposal that we should do something," Bourgeois explained. "Twelve one-week shows, including the best of what we'd done. Two years of work went into this. Mary Ann Wilkinson [curator of twentieth century art] approved the show. It opened Wednesday. Graham Beal came down on Thursday. He didn't say much. He was talking to someone else, not so much to me. He said, 'Well, it's up. It's too late. Anyway, I don't believe in censorship.' He indicated that he wanted to put up a disclaimer at the door. I had no objection to that.

"Friday, around mid-day, they put up the disclaimer. A little later a museum official told me chief curator David Penney wanted to talk to me. Her tone was so somber, I said, 'I feel like I'm going to the principal's office and I don't

know why.' We passed Beal on the way up; I said hello. I didn't know that while I was upstairs security was closing the show down."

Bourgeois continued: "Penney said, 'We'd like to talk about postponing the show.' I said, 'We can talk about it, but it's already open. Postpone isn't the right word, you mean shut down.' He said, 'Those are your words. We'd like to postpone it and have discussions. We want you to work with our curators in selecting and editing works from the show. We want to remount the show so we'll all be happy with it.' I asked, 'Will it be the same show? Will all these pieces be in it?' He said, 'No, I don't think so.'

"I said, 'In that case, it won't be the same show, it will be your show. It won't be my show, I can't agree to that. Because I'm the artist and you're telling me to change my art.' He said, 'Fine, if you don't want to have a dialogue ...' I said, 'You're not giving me any options.' What happened then was I came downstairs and found myself locked out. A reporter from the *Detroit News* came along who had been called by the museum to review the show; they wouldn't let her in. They closed the show to avoid controversy.

"I tried to reason with Beal. I said, 'You're trying to avoid controversy, but you're just going to create a bigger one. Nobody's complained. Wait till somebody complains. It's a weekly show, the show comes down Sunday. Nobody's complained, there's a good chance no one will. He wouldn't listen. He said, 'It's a lose-lose situation.'"

Museum officials have unconvincingly attempted to place the blame for the show's closure on Bourgeois, claiming that he has been uncooperative. In a November 22 press release, the museum asserted that its curator "had viewed some of the material included in the initial installation, but the entire work was not in place until November 18." At that time, according to the museum, Beal "expressed reservations about some of the works displayed and asked that the installation be temporarily postponed.... The museum attempted to address its concerns directly with Mr. Bourgeois, but he immediately refused to consider any changes to the installation. The Detroit Institute of Arts is

disappointed in Mr. Bourgeois's position, but stands by its position."

The closing down of "Art Until Now" was Beal's first official act as museum director. Born in England in 1947, he began his professional career at the Sheffield City Art Galleries in 1972. He came to the US, to work at the Steinberg Gallery of Art in St. Louis in 1974. He served as chief curator of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1984-89) and director of the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska (1989-96), before becoming director and executive vice-president of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1996. Beal made a name for himself by "turning around" the latter institution; its attendance doubled during his tenure and its budget increased by 71 percent.

While in LA, Beal claimed to understand something about the problems of presenting contemporary art. He told a reporter in 1997: "All art is contemporary at some time, and history implies that all new art is difficult for people to understand. The most extreme is the unbelievable outrage that [the] impressionists generated. It was so bad the people challenged each other to duels. Nothing [Republican Sen.] Jesse Helms could come up with could ever compete with that!"

At the same time, according to commentators, Beal made clear during his tenure at the LA County Museum that he wanted no part of controversy. He conspicuously rejected the *Sensation* exhibit, for example, on more than one occasion. In the DIA, the fifth largest fine arts museum in the US, Beal has inherited an institution in considerable crisis. The museum has come under both financial attack by the right-wing Republican Engler administration in Michigan and ideological attack from a section of black Democratic Party officials and nationalist ideologues in Detroit. The closing down of Bourgeois's show seems to be an effort to placate both elements. It is a signal to Beal's new employers of his intention not to rock the boat.

The museum also happens to be in the midst of a campaign to raise \$320 million in private donations over the next decade. According to a DIA press release, "The campaign opened with the announcement of the single most significant individual gift to a local cultural organization. Mrs. Walter Buhl Ford II, Mr. Richard A. Manoogian and Mr. A. Alfred Taubman have joined together to provide the museum with a \$50 million leadership gift to launch the fund raising effort." This is clearly not the moment to alienate potential contributors.

I suggested to Bourgeois that the cancellation of his exhibit seemed like an open-and-shut case of censorship and attack on democratic rights. What was his attitude? "Yeah, that's my attitude," he replied. "I'm more disappointed by the fact that this comes from the DIA. You expect this from Helms,

Giuliani, the politicians. Now the art institution is censoring itself. They're giving in. The art of the 90s, like it or not, is about pushing the buttons. You have to deal it with now, not wait five years, because it is the art of now."

"Did you ever have any premonitions, reading about *Sensation*, that the same thing could happen to you?" "No, quite the opposite," he replied. "One of the last articles in the *New York Times* indicated that there would be a backlash and that institutions would shy away from shows like this. I kind of thought maybe the opposite."

Giuliani's attempt to close down the Brooklyn Museum provoked little outrage from officials at other institutions in New York City. Bourgeois observed, "That's something I expect in this case too. I would be very surprised ... the museums tend to stick together. Doctors don't criticize other doctors." He couldn't think offhand of any organizations or individuals to whom he might speak or appeal to, or hope to hear from.

"As far as I'm concerned, I've lost two years of work, and 12 shows, which are site-specific and won't work anywhere else. I've had an offer from a gallery, but they wouldn't work there. I probably have legal recourse, but I don't want to go that way. It gets dirty and messy. I spent a lot of money on this show, they didn't give me any money."

Bourgeois indicated his concern about the general decline in art education and the extent to which art museums are becoming "Disneyfied" in attempts to increase attendance. He is saddened by the experience at the DIA. "It is a lose-lose situation. I don't want to be known for a show that nobody ever saw. It kills a lot of interest in your work. They think you're a troublemaker. Or the opposite can happen, you get typecast as a 'controversial' artist. The museum is spreading false stories about me, that I refused to compromise. It's not true. The DIA pulled the show."

During the *Sensation* controversy the cultural elite in New York City displayed scant interest in democratic principles and artistic freedom. DIA officials have now gone them one better: rather than wait for the ultra-right to launch an attack, they have taken on the function of censor themselves.



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