

Detroit museum controversy: Censored artist defends his exhibit

David Walsh
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The following is a statement issued by artist Jef Bourgeois in response to the decision by the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) November 19 to close down his exhibit, "Van Gogh's Ear," three days into its run. The show, the first of 12 one-week exhibits intended to explore issues in twentieth century art, contained references to various controversies in the art world, including Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ" and Chris Ofili's baby Jesus in a bathtub.

Museum officials have initiated a misinformation media campaign against Bourgeois. They are attempting to justify their action on the grounds that Bourgeois introduced certain pieces only at the last moment and that he refused to engage in a "dialogue" with them on the contents of the show once they had decided to "postpone" it. In reality, new DIA director Graham Beal and other officials carried out a preemptive strike against the exhibit, as a means of demonstrating to potential right-wing critics and wealthy donors that the museum plans to do nothing to rock the cultural or intellectual boat. It was a shameful act.

Bourgeois is director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Pontiac, Michigan.

DETROIT INSTITUTE CUTS "VAN GOGH'S EAR":

The mission of the Museum of Contemporary Art has always been to encourage dialogue. As the public's perception of contemporary art has become more and more uncertain, dialogue has often seemed more like negotiation, hard fought and hard won. Unfortunately, in many ways, contemporary art is still considered art outside the mainstream, actively challenging a comfortably established art world.

Nearly two years ago, I was approached by the Detroit Institute of Arts to research, explore and reflect

upon the art of this century, of this decade, and finally the direction art might take in the new millennium. An enormous undertaking, begun with some basic questions: What is art now? What has art been? And who decides art? Too big for one exhibition in a gallery 16 by 20 feet, I separated it all into twelve weekly exhibitions, each unique to different trends and issues in the art world. What I never expected was that simply examining and referencing the "beast", the exhibition itself became the "beast".

Three days after the opening of the initial 5 day installment, VAN GOGH'S EAR, the issue suddenly became a museum unwilling to come to terms with the art of its time. The public was never allowed to become a quotient, never given a voice in the decision process of what is or isn't art. The show was shut down without notice.

My art isn't on trial here. The show was once-removed, merely referencing other artworks and artists. And yet, the public was barred. The press was barred. By definition, the visual arts are meant to be seen. Contemporary art is on trial; because those attitudes and perceptions that VAN GOGH'S EAR had hoped to soften into dialogue have instead become all the more hardened and inflexible.

The visual arts are meant to be seen. Otherwise, how can they be judged—or condemned. The world is changing rapidly, so art is always in need of new contexts, new expression, new understandings. When the art world responds too slowly, too late or not at all to the art of its time, all is lost to art's intended audience, to the public, and its potency is forfeited forever. Contemporary art is a social exchange played out in the here and now. It doesn't take long for new art to go out of synch.

Does contemporary art set itself outside deliberately?

Or, is there a real resistance, a protective impetus from within the art museum to preserve art's "dignity" and "meaning", by allowing art only to address its already initiated audience?

When a museum plays into the logic of the spectacle (Egyptian; van Gogh) and attempts to attract larger and larger numbers at the gate by promoting themselves as artistic Disneylands, the laws of marketing have taken precedence over that of art.

By any art museum refusing to come to grip with the art of its time, it refuses to allow for interpretation and further alienates and polarizes the public from this art.

If current art is truly controversial, the DIA's new director's action to cut short controversy only provoked a much graver scandal within the art world itself. Museums everywhere are essential to a more complete understanding of contemporary art. To have one act so irresponsibly at this critical juncture, deliberately narrows the enormous variety possible to art as we move into the next century. Such a forced closing not only narrows the gate, but, more direly, sets a dangerous precedent: where museum directors not only decide art but censor it to suit the presumed tastes of "important parts" of the community.

Jef Bourgeau
Director,
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The pieces in the canceled exhibit can be viewed online at:

<http://andrewfish.com/VanGogh/>



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