Censorship, democracy and the state of contemporary art

A conversation with artist Jef Bourgeau

David Walsh, Joanne Laurier
22 January 2000


Jef Bourgeau

In November officials at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) closed down an exhibit of work by artist Jef Bourgeau two days after it had opened. The show, the first of a scheduled series of 12 by Bourgeau on art in the twentieth century, was entitled “Van Gogh's Ear,” and included pieces that referred to a number of recent art scandals. There were references to Andres Serrano's “Piss Christ,” work by Chris Ofili (whose painting created a controversy at the “Sensation” show at the Brooklyn Museum), a number of the “Young British Artists” and others. Bourgeau was locked out of his own exhibit and has subsequently been unable to contact DIA officials.

We spoke to Bourgeau at, or rather near his Museum of Contemporary Art, which is, as he puts it, “nestled inside” the Galerie Blu in Pontiac, Michigan. His museum is one attractive ... but quite small room. Bourgeau seems to be raising in this fashion some legitimate questions about the nature of museums, as he indicates below. He is also making the point that the Detroit area lacks a major institution dedicated to contemporary art.

David Walsh: Can you perhaps briefly explain what happened in November?

Jef Bourgeau: I can start at the beginning. About two years ago the curator of the contemporary department at the DIA asked me to do a show, as one of their millennium projects, to look forward, look backwards, and what was happening with art right now. Essentially to examine the twentieth century. So that's what I attempted to do over the past two years. I mounted some of the shows here just to see how they worked. Everything that was in the DIA show was either shown here or at the museum space we had before this.

I was supposed to have a two-week window to install the show. That got squeezed into one day. They didn't finish most of the painting until Monday. They put in the lighting. It was about three o'clock, they close at five, so I had about two hours Monday. There were about 15 pieces.

I started installing Tuesday and finished Tuesday. It was all up and running Wednesday morning. A couple of classes came through from CCS [Center for Creative Studies] and some high school kids, and just ordinary people came through. The electrician who put in the wiring for my lighting system showed up to see what it was about. He picked out a piece, from Piero Manzoni. One of the things that made him famous was canning famous artist's feces, as well as other things. Everything was mounted, like in the natural history museum, under glass bells to be examined. There was what looked like human feces under a double bell, for extra safety. The “feces” actually came from Gags and Gifts, a novelty store.

Anyway, the electrician came in, he was laughing. We had a good conversation. Some of the museum staff was there too. He said, I don't care what you call that, you can call it art, I still say it's s—-. We all laughed, because it was, it was supposed to be. We got into a conversation about what makes it art, if it is art.

Part of what our museum has done and what we were doing down there wasn't giving answers, this is art or isn't art, but asking: what is art, what makes art today art? Part of the problem with the museums now is that they're not sure. You've always had an aesthetic gauge against art. The way everything's art now, there's no gauge, the museums are going crazy. That's one of the reasons why they tend to steer clear of contemporary work, because they're not sure. They don't want to be caught with their pants down, saying this is art, and five years later it turns out, this wasn't art at all, it was crap.

The next day I heard voices outside the room. It was the curator of the contemporary department, Mary Ann Wilkinson, with the director, Graham Beal. He apparently didn't know anything about the show. I thought, this is absurd, I don't know what's going on. He came in and didn't really speak to me. He would say things, exclaim them, then there'd be a long, uncomfortable silence.

The next day the curator came down with the warning label on a stand. That was put out in front. A little while later she came back. She said, Graham Beal wants you to give us a precise, specific list of everything that's going to be coming along, and descriptions of everything. I said, sure. Finally, she came back and said, David Penney wants to talk to you. This is about an hour before the critic from the *Detroit News* was supposed to arrive.

So we went upstairs, and as we're going upstairs, security moves in and they slide the doors shut and lock it, padlock it. The photographer was locked in. Penney said, we'd like to postpone the show. I said, the show's already open. You can't postpone something that's already open, you shut it down. I asked, what do you want to do during this indeterminate amount of time? He said, we'd like to go over everything with our curatorial staff and select and edit and modify all the shows. I said, will these two pieces that you think are offensive be in the show when it's remounted? No, he said, they won't be in the show. I said, you say “postpone,” I hear “shut down”; you say “select, edit and modify,” and I hear “censor.”

I went downstairs. I knew the photographer was in there. I knocked and he let me in. He said, what's going on? I told him, and he said, I took the photographs and I'll let you have them. This was the DIA's photographer, for the catalogue. So anyhow, I was in there for a while. It went like

wildfire through the museum, what happened. So all the staff started filing through. They were just going through. I didn't really know what was going on. He didn't say they were going to shut the show down. He said, I'd like to talk about postponing it. There was really no conversation about shutting it down. I didn't know what was happening. Then the critic was going to come. Security showed up with a marketing person.

They said, you've got to leave, everybody's got to leave. They turned to me, and said, you've got to leave. I said, the *News* is going to be here, we've got an appointment that the critic set up through the museum. I think she has the right to see the show. I'm thinking, if they shut this door, this show will never exist, it will be sealed in this vault. I said, I'm not going to leave here, if you can give me some assurance that we can get back in the room and she can see the show, fine. They said, why don't you come upstairs and we can talk about it? I had called an old friend, he had arrived. They said, if you won't leave, we're going to have to physically remove you. I said to myself, do I want to go to jail for this? Yeah, sure. I said, well, OK then, that's what you're going to have to do, you'll have to physically remove me. They said, we won't do it, we'll call the police. My friend was tugging on my sleeve, you don't want to go to jail. I was in shock by this time. I worked two years on this and it was going to be closed down before it even began.

DW: What were the two pieces they found offensive?

JB: "Nigger Toe," which is about racism and its inculturation, and "Bath-tub Jesus." Beal was brought in because in LA he took the credit for increasing Hispanic and Asian attendance. That covers "Nigger Toe." "Bath-tub Jesus" relates to the "Sensation" show. That referenced Chris Ofili's piece. So those were the two he was afraid of. But nobody had complained. Nobody had called, nobody had done anything.

DW: Were you there throughout?

JB: I was there every day.

DW: Did you see any reactions? Hear any responses?

JB: No. The only cold response I got, and I didn't know who he was at the time, was from David Penney, the chief curator. He went through it and I thought I'm not going to approach this guy. He was real grim. I didn't know who he was. But everybody else.... Even the electrician laughed. There was a lady. She was one of the docents, in her 70s. She talked to me afterward and said, oh, it was wonderful, I enjoyed every bit of it. We had a good conversation about it.

DW: Since November 19, what's taken place?

JB: I finally understand what it all means. It's all been muddy for me. I've come across this before, where someone's come to me and said, we can't actually ask you to change these pieces, that would be censorship, but if you don't, we're going to shut you down. My question is, isn't that censorship in the highest degree?

They keep talking about their curatorial rights to exercise what can or can't be in a show or in their museum. But that happens before you open the show. You work with the artist or you work with the curators and you decide what's going to be in the show. Once the show's opened, if you change anything, that's censorship. I understand now why their strategy has been to say that I tried sneaking those two pieces into the show, which wasn't true. They were on the list. They had a binder, with 80 pages of documents, with reviews of that show, naming some of those pieces specifically. This is the strategy, to say that they didn't get a chance to exercise their curatorial right because I was trying to hide things from them.

DW: What happened this week?

JB: I tried calling them, I went down there Monday after they shut down the show. I was locked out. I've been trying to communicate from the beginning. They've been telling the press that I won't talk to them. I tried phoning, they won't return my calls. So I e-mailed them. Which I'd done before to force a meeting with Mary Ann Wilkinson. It was always hard to get her into a meeting in those two years, so finally I'd just send her an e-mail and say, I'm coming Thursday at 1 o'clock, and I'm assuming that this time and day is fine with you. If it isn't, let me know. So I did that. I didn't get a response. But I went anyhow, hoping that somebody would talk to me.

You go in the business entrance, there's a guard there. She has a phone. She didn't even pick up the phone, she already had her instructions. She said, you have an appointment? I said, I hope so, I'm here to see Mary Ann Wilkinson. She's unavailable. I said, OK, I'll talk to her assistant. She's unavailable. Then Graham Beal. Somebody had just called me and said that he had just got back from Europe. She said, he's still on vacation.

DW: So where are we at?

JB: They won't speak to me.

DW: Do they have any plans for contemporary art?

JB: They want to build an annex. That will be for contemporary art. They can't have it in the museum, they've got to put it outside, to make it safe. These are such hallowed grounds, that they can't show contemporary art.

Attitudes have changed. Ten years ago the director of the Corcoran canceled the Mapplethorpe show. It was a traveling show, it wasn't even her show, but she canceled it. [The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D C, canceled photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's scheduled "The Perfect Moment" show in 1989, after Sen. Jesse Helms complained that it was "obscene."]

Censorship flags went up and she lost her job. This is 10 years later. And you have something like the "Sensation" show and everybody in New York pretty much sits on their hands. And you have Philippe de Montebello [of New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art] writing an op-ed piece [in the *New York Times*] tearing apart the show. Where is the art community now and what has happened?

DW: The director of the Corcoran lost her job because of censorship. Beal was trying to save his *by* censorship.

JB: Yes, exactly. Why now? Why is it a non-issue? The art world has changed. The people running things are more like bureaucrats, less interested in art, more interested in preserving their hallowed museums, going back to the nineteenth century idea of what a museum should be. That it should be pretty much a church.

Much of the contemporary art is "low art." This is the argument we had while we were waiting for the critic. A couple of people were saying that the general public would never understand the subtleties. I said, wait a second, I had a space for three years in Pontiac. Pontiac is pretty much a ghost town, except for shelters and missions and halfway houses and a half-block from my space was the Salvation Army. The majority of people who came in were these people. We had conversations that would last hours. Don't say it's too subtle. You don't have dumb down your art for the general public.

The museum is playing on all sorts of things. A guard told me they had a briefing. They said, I might be hostile. They said I was a racist. By throwing those things out, and throwing out to the press that this was a racist piece, and this is anti-Christian. These are things to stir the people up. To confirm the sentiment of the public in general against contemporary art. People are always afraid of things they don't know. Not a lot of people go to museums, and if they do, they go to blockbuster shows.

In 1995 we did a show, "Naked in the '90s." That show changed my viewpoint. Because of the reactions of people. There were some very strong images there. Masturbating, sexual stuff. We had a Greyhound busload of Country Day mothers pulled up, and I thought, my God. Forty of these women came in. Five stood at the door and they said, we don't know if we can handle this. Those five were the ones that stayed after everybody left and talked. We were talking about things they would never talk about anywhere else. Intimate things about their lives, about art.

The city was upset, businesses around were upset, they didn't know how

to deal with it. So they called the mayor and he said, call a church, have them do something. What he ended up doing was sending in the zoning board. Instead of saying, this is censorship, they said that I didn't have a permit to run a museum. A city lawyer came and she said, I just want to see what's happening. My landlady warned me about what was happening, but she said, this lawyer has gone to college, so we have some hope there. This lawyer comes in, she says, I'm just picking up my kids, this is off the record. She just looked around like this and said, I've seen this before, it's art. Then she left. That was the end of the city.

This church woman came in with a bible, and was literally thumping with me it. Saying, pornographer, Satanist and all this other stuff. I was saying, this is beautiful. Because I thought, I'm not sure how I can defend this work, because I don't understand what's going on. So I said, let me get my tape recorder, I'll be right back. So I went and got it. She was at the door totally calm. I said, no, you can't leave, I've got my tape recorder, we've got to argue, I've got to figure this out myself. She said, I went through it all, I want to bring back one of my discussion groups to see the work.

The bible lady came back a week later. I don't know why, she says, I just couldn't get my discussion group to see why I wanted them to come see the show. I said, well, if you described it, they're going to run. Something happened. It happened all the time during that show. That helped me understand why this art is different than art of hundred years ago, or fifteen years ago, or ten years ago. When art used to upset people it was the art itself, it was the meaning of it. People fought duels over Impressionism, they were so upset about it. Then it was other things, Cubism. People would throw things. This work isn't drawing from the medium, it's drawing from the culture itself. It isn't just for the elite. I think that's what frightens a lot of people. Art is accessible to the general public.

DW: But what is the quality of the culture? Are you entirely uncritical of that culture?

JB: I think any art that is created has to be created of and for its time, not for a hundred years in the future. I heard a lecturer. He pointed out that artists used to use materials that would last a thousand years, for the future generations. Why create art for future generations? When I was growing up Picasso was the artist of the century. Now it's Duchamp. Who would have thought that a urinal would have taken over by the end of the century, and inspired so much?

DW: Duchamp and Dadaism also represented an element of protest. The great culture of the nineteenth and previous centuries had produced what? The slaughter of World War I. A madhouse in which millions died over a few acres of France. What I'm complaining about, when I see something like “Sensation,” is that it's *too much* a reflection of the culture. That it doesn't protest against the state of things. It's in many cases, frankly, a shallow response.

JB: I wouldn't necessarily argue with you. In regard to the British artists, for example. In my opinion, everything was created in art in the first 20 years of the century, and everything since has just been playing over and over in different variations. There's a strange thing happening in the art world itself. Artists that are not just imitating other artists, they're pretty much absorbing what they are doing and *becoming* them.

You've put me on the spot. But I think that there is art out there that is something more. That's why I think of *Dorian Gray*. The art has become more and more the conscience because it's lowered itself. It's a mirror more of popular culture. I think that that by not providing a safe haven, it exposes the culture more to the culture. I think it's generally a positive thing.

DW: At its weakest, my problem is that it's not really an alternative to the “elitist” position, but its complement. You can have your Monet blockbuster and you can have Damien Hirst, and I'm not convinced that they contradict one another. Particularly when you consider the money and careerism. The cynicism of the art scene in New York and London is quite extraordinary.

JB: I know that there's a lot of careerism. A lot of it's pushing envelopes because they can get notoriety. Damien Hirst said, I can go out and pick up a piece of doggy doo off the street and put it on a banana, stick it on a pedestal, give it a good name, and anybody will buy it. That's part of it too. That's part of pushing the envelope, that's exposing the collectors for what they are too.

I think what Duchamp started to do was to say that everything was art. Once you do that, he said, then nothing is art. Whether that's good or bad, I don't know. I think that everything can be art and that everybody can have their own museum, everybody *is* kind of their own museum, everybody carries their own images with them that are important to them. There are wheat-fields I see and I think of Van Gogh.

What I heard and what I read and what I saw was that the '90s were going to be about social issues, art was going to delve into that and really sink its teeth into that. There were a few shows that did that. There was the show at the Whitney where the guy went out and photographed all the homeless people, and the show got trashed, because they said he was exploiting these poor homeless people. There were artists like Sue Coe and some other artists who were doing things. They got brushed aside, and it felt like all that was gone. I think it isn't gone, it's just coming in a strange way. Artists are still dealing with major issues, all the identity art, gender identity, gay identity, black identity.

Joanne Laurier: You talked about the social conditions in Pontiac. An artist has to have an element of the utopian. If we talk about the social conditions, they are irrational, abominable. Anyone who makes light of it, in a cynical way ...

JB: Or those who create politically correct art.

DW: Which is just as deadly.

JB: There's a kind of art that is highly charged. The art that got pushed under the rug at the beginning of the decade, rightly or wrongly, came across as propaganda.

DW: Blandness, careerism, indifference, impersonality. Coldness, chilliness. These are the qualities that I reject.

JB: I think it's possible to highly charge these things. By combining elements. Just by putting a glass bell over a magnifying glass with a Brazil nut under it, and calling it “Nigger Toe.” Just that little combination of everyday objects. We're talking about the mechanics of prejudice, how these things are inculturated in us. How does something as innocuous as a nut become a racial seed, that can become a platform as we grow up? That's what I find so interesting. Just to take those two little elements.

Everything's become so politically correct. I did this show once. There were all these highly starched white shirts on the wall. In the pocket of the second shirt was a little manual for the Ku Klux Klan. It happened after that Texaco business, where those guys taped themselves with that racist stuff. So these rich people, these collectors came in. I explained the piece to them, they said, there's no racism. A black man can become president if he wants to. I said, what about this Texaco thing, it's in the papers? They said, it's isolated. There's no racism. Everything's so politically correct. These things don't exist. If you don't talk about them, then they don't exist. But they *do* exist, under the surface.

Art isn't something that should hide from these issues. A lot of people think that art shouldn't be about such things. One of the statements from the museum said that it isn't a place for politics, social issues.

DW: They have the Diego Rivera mural!

JB: Exactly. Beal keeps getting his picture taken in front of it. There's irony there.

People say this [his own space] isn't a museum. What makes a museum? Is it because you have money and can get a nice building and hire people? I do here as much as any other museum.

DW: These are legitimate questions. Part of the action of the museum is

aimed at suppressing those questions.

JB: It's against what they're trying to, to get more people to shuffle through, with their headphones that tell them what each piece is supposed to mean. People aren't allowed to come to the art with their own ideas.

JL: There was the audacity of [New York City Mayor Rudolph] Giuliani's lawyer, who was asked by the judge whether the mayor had the right to walk into any city museum and demand that such and such a piece be taken down. He said yes.

JB: Giuliani doesn't have the right to do that. But any time that tax dollars come into it, then whoever represents where those tax dollars go, has a right to say something. I go back to Vietnam, and the feeling that I have a right to say that my money shouldn't go to this. It's a danger. Especially if the government becomes totalitarian, pushes right or more left, that they can decide about the art in the museums. In Europe they give all they want to the museums and they have a free hand to do whatever they want. Here everybody feels the right to determine what we do with these dollars.

JL: But do we really have a say?

JB: We'd like to. The danger is that you're getting money from the government. Everybody here, rightly or wrongly, feels they have the right to say where the money goes. That's the big issue in my case. They said I was getting tax dollars and that's not right. Well, I didn't get any money, but I think they have a right to complain, because it is their money, it is my money. If I saw somebody doing what Hitler did with art here, I would have the right to say, no, I don't like that.

DW: What is the nature of that government, who does it represent, who does it speak for?

JB: Exactly, and I think there's a danger taking money from it.

DW: There is a problem with that. First, let's backtrack. When you're talking about the US versus Europe, the tax dollars for art involved here are pathetic. Less than a dollar per person per year. There's a danger of falling for their arguments. They're not concerned, in that sense, with where the tax dollars go. They give tax dollars to God knows who, corporations, big business. They're raising this for political purposes. A truly civilized society would say, here's the money, to the artists, do what you want with it. Otherwise, art must be profit-making? What do you end up with? Broadway, Hollywood.

JB: I'm saying that I think a lot of the present situation is attributable to the NEA. It's the way the government works and the way that the mentality works, if we're getting money from the government, we've got to have lawyers and accountants to be accountable for this money and how we're using it. I've written grants. In Michigan, you have to explain how this is going to support and promote Michigan in your art. There are going to be watch-dogs, and museums feel obligated, whether it's a corporation or the government, to watch how the money is going to be used.

DW: I agree fully, that is a danger.

JB: I have a friend who keeps getting grants and he's never finished a work.

DW: Frankly, there is a milieu of grant-gathering artists who I wouldn't give five cents for, people who are good at writing grants and know all the double-talk. That is a corrupt milieu. I think that's different from giving an inch to Giuliani. His argument was that anti-religious art was illegal. Supposedly there is a separation of church and state.

JB: That's my point. When you have tax dollars involved, somebody like that could get more and more control, especially the way things are going. I'm a footnote to that situation in New York.

DW: What are the alternatives?

JB: Can institutions survive without government money?

DW: Can different kinds of institutions and organizations be built up? There's the question of corporate sponsorship.

JB: I've been in groups where we did pieces about Detroit. “Now that's a little negative in this piece about the assembly line. Maybe we'll have to cut that or we won't get the money.” This was from an artist.

DW: In my view, also a lot of this depends upon the emergence of some social movement of opposition. As long as the population is relatively quiescent, it is going to be difficult for artists to find sources of funding, or sources of inspiration. Is the stock market going to inspire the artists? Seventy or eighty years ago, if artists were unhappy about the state of society or art, and they were angered about the state of either, they would automatically think in terms of some kind of social movement, social revolution. Is that the case today?

JB: But how did it come out in art?

DW: It came out in the art of the teens and twenties, Cubism, Futurism, the Bauhaus, Surrealism.

JB: The Futurists supported war.

DW: Not the Russian Futurists.

JB: Picasso painted Guernica, but he was something of a Sunday communist.

DW: You can criticize all sorts of people individually, but the art of the period was interesting art.

JB: It had a lot of energy.

DW: A lot of energy and urgency. I'm not gloomy, in that sense. I think this will revive. I think there have to be different sources. People have to be impelled by something they see and feel. It can't just be in the art. It can't just be in popular culture. There's got to be some sense that the possibility exists of getting out of this present state of things.

JB: That's my point, popular culture is this, is our time. It's our lives, it's not looking backward, it's not looking forward.

JL: I think our lives are difficult, I think our lives are unacceptable. What's happening to millions of people is unacceptable.

JB: How do you put this into art without its being propaganda?

DW: I don't know. There's no easy or immediate answer. The artist has to decide that.

JB: It is being done.

DW: Perhaps, yes. In isolated cases. Any serious work will bring people up against their own reality and the possibility of some other reality, will always suggest that there must be something other than what's around us.

JL: Wilde said: A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth glancing at.

DW: What is the situation in this part of the world?

JB: It's a lot about things like the Young British Artists. They see that these people are successful, they have an enviable lifestyle. Or they get discouraged. We did a big show a couple of years ago. Most of those people I haven't seen or heard from, I don't think they're artists any more. You have this lure of fame and fortune, on the one hand; on the other, there is the reality here, people get discouraged very easily. You have to make a living, you have to survive. There's also the element of commitment.

I want this thing to grow, because I think we need a real contemporary art museum; there's a vacuum. And it will be healthy competition with the DIA. It will get them going.

DW: Is there any interest?

JB: Not really. If I just had one other artist.... I think that a lot of people feel this way. But nobody's going to do anything until the train starts moving, and then they'll jump on board.

DW: What do you do next?

JB: The ideal thing would be take this space and put it across the street from the DIA. It's interesting, a lot of people at other galleries in Detroit won't even talk to me. The DIA has so much power here. I sent an e-mail to a curator. I got no response. Everybody is tied into everybody.

See Also:

New attack on artistic freedom and democratic rights: Detroit museum shuts down exhibit

[24 November 1999]
Detroit museum controversy: Censored artist defends his exhibit
[10 December 1999]