Pontiac panel discussion on censorship and the arts

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On March 4 a symposium entitled “Fear No Art: The Politics of Correctness,” held in the Detroit suburb of Pontiac, Michigan, explored the mounting threat to artistic expression and democratic rights. Motivating the meeting were a number of recent acts of censorship, including the attempt to shut down the “Sensation” exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum by New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and the closure of artist Jef Bourgeau's exhibit, “Art Until Now,” by officials at the Detroit Institute of Art (DIA).

In fact, the meeting took place only a short time after police had issued a citation to Bourgeau, and threatened him with arrest, for displaying “obscene materials” in a gallery located one flight below the meeting place in downtown Pontiac. (See accompanying article.)

The event drew about 100 artists, local residents and others from the Pontiac-Detroit region. The panel, moderated by N'Kenge Zola of WDET public radio in Detroit, included people from a variety of backgrounds including artists, writers, critics and museum administrators. Among the panelists was David Walsh, arts editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Each panelist had the opportunity to make a brief introductory statement. Afterwards the discussion was opened for exchanges between the panelists and between the panelists and the audience.

A number of speakers alluded to the recent acquittal of the four New York City policeman who shot West African immigrant Amadou Diallo 41 times. There was a general feeling that the shooting and the verdict were symptomatic of a deep political and social malaise in the US that was bound up with the growing attempt at censorship of the arts.

Former chief curator of the DIA, Jan van der Marck, explained the context in which the decision by newly appointed DIA Director Graham Beal to pull the “Art Until Now” exhibit was taken. The action, he observed, reflected an intense fear of alienating potential wealthy donors. “The DIA's financial survival overrides all other considerations.... The safest course to steer is noncontroversial, politically correct, child-centered art.”

He warned of the impact of growing corporate control over the arts. “There is a willing surrender of control to amorphous corporate and publicitarian interests.... Can the day be far when the corporate world takes over and controls venerable museums?” Van der Marck pointed to the recent AOL/Time-Warner merger as a dangerous symptom.

Wayne State University art professor Marilyn Zimmerman related her “rite of passage” in regard to the censorship issue. In 1993 a janitor turned in to supervisors a proof sheet he found in her trash can containing nude photos of her young daughter. This led to an interview with Wayne State police and threats of prosecution under state laws against child sexually abusive material. Zimmerman denounced the unholy alliance of Radical Feminists and the religious right in the passage of pornography legislation.

David Walsh of the *WSWS* posed the question, “On what political basis should a movement against corporate control and censorship be based?” (See accompanying article for Walsh's remarks.)

John “Crash” Matos, a young artist from the Bronx currently exhibiting his work at a Pontiac gallery, spoke of the problems he faced as a minority artist from a working class background. He made particular reference to the Diallo shooting, which had taken place not far from where he lived.

In the discussion period panelists examined a number of questions including the extent to which an artist should consider the public response to his or her work,

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the value of art to society and the principles artists should base themselves on in opposing censorship.

Van der Marck warned again about the stifling impact of corporate pressure on the art community. “It is difficult to raise money for a public institution and we tend to pander. We will always make our appeal based on special programs.... I know we are making appeals to corporations for things that are easy for them to attach their own name tags to. All the money is so often overloaded with extra motives and agendas that it is hard to run a straightforward institution.”

“Companies are always very happy to put information into digital form because it can be easily tagged. The kind of support we were getting was always so self-serving.”

Commenting on the remarks by van der Marck, Walsh noted, “How can you discuss artistic expression without discussing corporate control?” He observed that one aspect of the crisis of art was the tendency of “a good many artists to adapt themselves to corporate control and thereby blunt the critical edges of their art.”

One young person in the audience, moved by the question of censorship, asked how an effective movement could be built to defend artistic expression. Another audience member expressed the view that a society that glorifies the stock market and individual greed, that turns the artist into a commodity seller, is antithetical to artistic expression.

Following the forum, there was informal conversation between the panelists and the audience. Many of those in attendance stopped by an information table set up by supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and the *WSWS* to purchase literature and discuss the socialist viewpoint on the defense of artistic expression and democratic rights.

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