

The "Sanitation" controversy at New York's Whitney Museum: freedom of expression under attack

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A controversy has arisen over Hans Haacke's installation piece, "Sanitation," part of the biennial exhibit at New York City's Whitney Museum of American Art (which opens March 23). The row surrounding this piece has been quite deliberately provoked for the purpose of suppressing artistic expression and political criticism.

A media campaign against "Sanitation" has been spearheaded by Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post*, and two members of the Whitney family have threatened to disinherit the museum. New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has joined the fray, publicly criticizing the piece. Coming only a few months after Giuliani's (unsuccessful) attempt to close down the "Sensation" exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the attacks on the new exhibit underscore the fact that the basic democratic right to freedom of expression is under sustained attack in the US, and is increasingly in jeopardy.

Haacke, a well-known German-born artist, has produced a piece that reportedly includes a copy of the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which protects free speech, alongside quotations from Giuliani, North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, Christian right leader Pat Robertson and would-be Reform Party presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan attacking public funding of artistic work they find offensive. Buchanan is quoted as saying: "This elite cries 'censorship' and falls back upon that last refuge of the modern scoundrel, the First Amendment."

The quotations are printed in the Fraktur Gothic typeface favored by the Hitler regime, and beneath the citations Haacke has placed a row of garbage cans, each fitted with a speaker playing the sounds of marching troops.

The title of the piece makes reference to last year's

"Sensation" exhibit. Giuliani attacked a painting by Chris Ofili bearing the image of the Virgin Mary as "anti-religious" and "anti-Catholic" and cut off the museum's funding in an effort to force the exhibit's closure. A court later ruled that the city had no right to withhold the money and funding was restored. In his piece, Haacke has used three quotes from Giuliani referring to "Sensation."

Without having seen "Sanitation" it is difficult to gauge its artistic merit or political effectiveness. Haacke (born 1936) has a long history of producing socially critical work. In his "real-time systems" he has combined materials, words and images to critique advertising, industry and political life, particularly in their relation to the art world.

The Guggenheim Museum famously canceled his solo exhibit in 1971, allegedly because it contained a work exposing the career and business operations of a slum landlord with ties to the museum. In his *Manet Project* (1974) Haacke used one of French painter Edouard Manet's works as a centerpiece surrounded by a critique of all the previous owners of the painting. In 1981 his *Creating Consent* exposed Mobil Oil's expenditure on advertising.

He has also taken on Saatchi & Saatchi (the British advertising moguls and art collectors), Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. In another well-known work Haacke created a giant pack of cigarettes called "Helmsboro," with the words "Philip Morris [the giant tobacco firm] funds Jesse Helms" printed on it.

Drawing attention to the dangers represented by the extreme right in this country, as Haacke has apparently done in "Sanitation," is entirely legitimate and indeed much needed. The great unmentionable in the American media is the fact that figures like Robertson, Jerry Falwell, James Dobson and the Christian right represent a

fascistic element with powerful influence over the Republican Party. Buchanan, who has chosen to break from the Republicans for his own political reasons, belongs to this breed and Giuliani panders to it. Haacke has done a public service by raising the issue.

The media and the political establishment have responded to “Sanitation” with instinctive hostility. Giuliani somewhat regretfully noted that because public money was not involved, “The government has no right to intervene.” Presumably this was a warning that if such an installation were to be exhibited in a publicly funded museum, his intervention would be guaranteed. The mayor went on to say: “There is an issue here about demeaning the whole historical and contemporary importance of the Holocaust.”

The two members of the Whitney family who have threatened to disinherit the museum, in statements well publicized by Murdoch's *Post*, have leveled the same accusation. So did the Anti-Defamation League. This theme is being echoed throughout the New York establishment: Haacke is “trivializing” the Holocaust by his piece.

This is a red herring, introduced by Giuliani and others to confuse layers of the population with demagoguery. Haacke's point is very clear: the fascist-like threat to artistic expression and democratic rights by modern-day American political figures.

The artist, having grown up under the Nazis and married for 35 years to a Jewish woman, has categorically rejected the allegations made by Giuliani and others. He told the *New York Times*, “What I'm very upset about is the attempt to dictate to museums what they show, and the statements made by politicians in Washington that have curtailed the freedom of the National Endowment for the Arts. The attention to those issues is deflected by the spin of my supposedly having trivialized the Holocaust.”

Giuliani's posturing on this issue is particularly cynical. Aside from the obviously opportunist character of his statements, is it not unseemly that a man who has defended each and every police crime, targeted welfare recipients, immigrants and street peddlers for persecution, attempted to ban demonstrations and art exhibits and generally operated as a political bully should invoke the memory of Holocaust victims to defend his policies?

The threat to artistic expression in the US is taking a more and more concrete form. Giuliani justified his attempt to close down the “Sensation” exhibit on the grounds that it was illegitimate for “taxpayers' dollars” to subsidize “anti-religious” art. Now an exhibit at a

privately-funded museum is threatened with the withdrawal of the founding family's name and financial support for displaying a controversial work.

The message is clear: difficult or politically oppositional work is not welcome in *either public or private institutions*. A ruling elite, set apart from the rest of the population by a chasm of social inequality, has a compelling interest in preventing the development of critical artistic work. Serious art over the next period will come into greater and greater conflict with the framework of the profit system and its political apparatus.

The response of the liberal cultural and political elite to the campaign against Haacke, predictably, has been silence. Their cowardice in the “Sensation” affair only encouraged Giuliani and the right wing. Hillary Clinton exemplifies this layer. After criticizing Giuliani for attempting to close the Brooklyn Museum, she deplored “Sensation,” without of course having seen it, and pledged to boycott the exhibit. Now she says nothing. Nor does anyone else within the museum and cultural officialdom. Within this milieu, those who aren't close to Giuliani are frightened of him.

It is a real question in the US today: is there a single traditional organization, liberal, labor or civil rights—or even any prominent individual in such circles—capable of (or interested in) organizing the defense of artistic expression and freedom of speech? The enrichment of these layers, their general self-satisfaction and complacency and their own movement to the political right have made such a prospect more and more unlikely. Different social forces and a different political perspective are needed. Those serious about democratic rights will find that the struggle to defend artistic expression will have to take a politically conscious anti-capitalist direction.



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