

WSWS Arts Editor David Walsh's remarks to Detroit forum

"Serious artistic work is incompatible with intellectual cowardice"

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David Walsh's remarks at the January 6 forum in Detroit: "The 21st Century Museum: Reinventing art for the new millennium"

In considering the prospects for art and art museums in the twenty-first century, first of all, it seems to me necessary to consider the prospects for society as a whole in the twenty-first century. Art is a form of social consciousness, a museum is a public institution. Whether one likes it or not, it is impossible to discuss art and museums in the US—or Canada, for that matter—without taking into account the intensifying assaults on democratic rights. Museums, artists and society in general face the threat of coming under the heel of an extreme right-wing bureaucracy in Washington and elsewhere. The Jesse Helms crowd is now in power. The people who believe that every art exhibition should be vetted by the local Fundamentalist deacon are in control.

In November, two agents from the FBI and Secret Service, from the Joint Terrorism Task Force, paid a visit to an alternative art space in Houston, which was holding an exhibition entitled "Secret Wars," the responses of a number of artists to covert operations and government secrets. Some of these were overtly political responses, some highly personal. In any event, the agents announced they were there because of reports of "anti-American" activities. They asked about the directors, about the museum's financing and so forth.

This was an outrageous attack on artistic freedom and democratic rights. I would hope that all the institutions represented here would join in a protest against this McCarthyite attempt to suppress dissident views. In the name of the "war against terrorism," democratic rights are being destroyed in the US.

And anyone who thinks that by keeping his mouth shut he will avoid problems is living in a dream world. We already have the experience of the [Mayor Rudolph] Giuliani attack on the *Sensation* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum and the decade-long attack on the National Endowment for the Arts, whose officials responded by accommodating themselves entirely to the extreme right. The Museum of New Art was founded in part as a response to the censorship carried out by the DIA against Jef Bourgeois, and the last time we held a public discussion like this in Pontiac the police had bullied their way in downstairs and were writing out a summons for obscenity. A counteroffensive by artists and the artistic community against these forces would evoke a powerful response in the population at large. In any event, serious artistic work is incompatible with intellectual cowardice. We live in intensely political times. To shut one's eyes to that reality is absurd and sterile.

More generally, how is it possible to pursue creative work by turning a blind eye to the state of society at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The US is riven by social contradictions, with a handful having accumulated staggering wealth. We've experienced in the past several years a manufactured sex scandal fueling an impeachment drive, the hijacking of a national election and the takeover of the federal government by the extreme right. These elements, who rule by gangsterism and conspiracy, have now launched a brutal colonial conflict in Afghanistan, in the name of combating terrorism, and promise a future of never-ending war, against Iraq, against Somalia, against Iran or whatever the series of targets proves to be. Meanwhile, unemployment has soared over eight million and the destruction of jobs and living standards

continues.

Under these conditions, if art institutions are not prepared to present dissident views, what good are they? What's the point? One might as well turn on CNN, or take a trip to Disney World. Great periods of artistic activity have been fueled by profound ideas and profound movements, at the heart of which will always be found the project of human progress and changing society for the better. Genuine art always contains the element of protest, even if it is only a protest against the conditions of intellectual creation. The remarkable art of the first third of the twentieth century is impossible to understand without an appreciation of the mass social and intellectual opposition to capitalism.

In regard to the Museum of New Art, specifically, it is my opinion that a museum dedicated to contemporary art will not be built today as the plaything of a section of the upper middle class. There has been a sharp turn to the right by these social layers. Nor will it be built by adopting an uncritical attitude toward contemporary art itself, so much of which is cold and empty and lacking in strong purpose. The crisis in art and the crisis in society are linked, and neither can be ignored. Today a museum like MoNA will either be built as a social movement, attracting the young, the disaffected, the critically-minded, and openly solidarizing itself with political and social opposition, or it will not be built into anything serious at all.

I think a discussion in the arts community on some of these issues is long overdue. I hope this is merely the first of many. Thank you.



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