Detroit panel discusses role of art museum in twenty-first century

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On January 6 the Museum of New Art (MoNA) in Detroit, Michigan sponsored a panel discussion titled "The 21st Century Museum: Reinventing art for the new millennium."

The seven-member panel, moderated by Dick Goody, director of Oakland University's Meadow Brook Art Gallery, discussed the current state of art and art museums, as well as the specific future of MoNA. The forum grew out of MoNA's ongoing efforts to provide a counterforce to what many see as the trend toward crass commercialism by the official artistic establishment.

A group of Detroit-area artists and art supporters founded MoNA in the summer of 2000. An important catalyst was the censorship by the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) of an exhibition curated by Michigan artist Jef Bourgeau. Among the museum's stated aims is "To offer a forum and a safe haven for innovative artists" and "To advance in every way possible the renewal of art and cultural life."

The project has attracted considerable grassroots support. Last winter it moved into the second floor of a building in downtown Detroit. A silent auction in May 2001 raised $40,000 for the museum and attracted international support. The board of directors of MoNA includes: Bourgeau; Jan van der Marck, former chief curator of the DIA; and David Walsh, arts editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

About 125 artists, professionals, students and other Detroit-area residents attended the January 6 forum. Panelists included academics, art critics and museum administrators. Walsh and Van der Marck participated on behalf of MoNA.

Van der Marck, the first director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, discussed the history of contemporary art museums since the founding of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1929 under the direction of Alfred Barr. He observed that that there had not been many changes in the general concept of a contemporary art museum since that time.

Many of the initial contributions by panelists dealt with problems of fundraising and other practical aspects of art museum management, rather than with the broader perspective that might guide a museum and its supporters. For example, Michelle Spivak, director of the Center Galleries at the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit, questioned whether the city could sustain another contemporary art museum. She noted "the challenge facing curators to maintain integrity in face of donor pressure."

In his opening contribution, David Walsh of the *WSWS* said, "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." He suggested that art museum professionals and artists generally needed a perspective based on a thoroughgoing critique of existing social relations. He referred to the attacks on democratic rights and artistic freedom in the US and Canada. (*See article in today's* WSWS). Walsh called for the museum to become a rallying point for dissident views.

Helga Pakasaar, formerly of the Art Gallery of Windsor, disagreed with Walsh, downplaying the issue of the attacks on free speech and suggesting that a museum was in the business of carrying out "traditional" activities.

Jeffrey Abt of Wayne State University and the author of a recent book on the history of the DIA (*A Museum on the Verge: a socioeconomic history of the Detroit Institute of Arts*), declared that considerations of "modernity"—for example, what is contemporary

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art?—raised the issue of time.

Cranbrook Art Museum Director Greg Wittkopp suggested that museums were confronted with the choice of concentrating on "object or audience." He observed that art institutions in recent years had shifted toward the latter, i.e., toward the pursuit of audiences.

Other panelists debated the proper relationship between MoNA and established museums such as the DIA. While most agreed that an alternative was needed to the status quo, there were problems formulating a clear concept of what that alternative might be.

Following their prepared statements the moderator initiated a discussion among panelists. Among the topics treated were censorship and the question as to whether art museums should strive to be "popular" as opposed to orienting themselves to an "elite" audience. The assumption by a number of the panelists was that sponsoring difficult or innovative art would automatically "alienate" the general public.

Addressing the question of the current artistic and cultural level, Walsh said, "As Wordsworth noted, a great artist creates the audience who can appreciate his or her work; accommodating to the perceived level of audiences is a great mistake."

Discussion continued on the question of the possibly limited appeal of a museum such as MoNA. Van der Marck noted that in Europe a great number of young people visit art galleries compared to the United States. "There is not enough hunger or intellectual curiosity in Detroit, or we have not been able to find a proper focus for it. Museums can be agents for social change, or they are involved at some level in social change. If MoNA can be a social force, that is all to the good. If the audience is not there now, maybe it will be in the future"

Abt pointed out that in the US the great art museums were built in the late nineteenth century as municipal institutions, while their equivalents in Europe were nationally organized and financed entities. The National Gallery of Art in Washington was not founded until 1937. The Louvre in Paris, he said, was a product of the French Revolution.

Audience members participated in the question period that concluded the forum. Many expressed enthusiasm for the project and urged the museum to reach out to wider layers of the population, including youth and minority workers.

An audience member asked Walsh how MoNA could reach a larger audience and, given the political climate, how the museum could reduce its need for government funds.

Walsh replied, "There are no easy answers. I think that the right wing has influence largely by default in this country. They represent a small minority. Speakers mention large audiences for museums in England, France; of course, different countries have different cultural experiences. I don't think the American population should be blamed for its low cultural level. They have been the victims over the past several decades of a concerted attack on everything progressive. They have been bombarded by all the worst influences—the mass media, television, etc. To build an audience we have to fight for it. We have to fight. I believe people can be drawn to art and museums, and not by accommodating to low levels of culture. As Oscar Wilde said, it's not that art must be made 'popular,' but that the public must be made 'artistic.'"

Later Walsh added, in response to further complaints about the lack of interest in Detroit in art, "I don't think the problem is the population of the city. We are in a ravaged city, look out the window. Detroit was built as a barracks for the auto industry. The auto companies have ravaged it. The city has been deprived of culture. Living standards are under attack. Many people can barely put three meals on the table, let alone go to a museum."

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