A gathering firestorm

Smithsonian's decision to remove a controversial video makes censorship a hot topic again

By Dan Barkoff

When the National Portrait Gallery removed a video by the late David Wojnarowicz from its exhibition "Hide/Speak" two weeks ago, it had no idea that the ensuing firestorm would become bigger news than an entire exhibit devoted to analyzing society's changing attitudes toward sexuality, desire and romantic entanglement.

But this is what's happened:

Dozens of galleries, museums, universities and art associations around the world have removed the video, which contains a portrayal of violence and abuse inflicted on a gay man. The video, which was included in the exhibit "My Body, My Bed, My Suicide," has been circulating on the Internet.

The video, called "A Fire in My Belly," was shown at the New York Aquarium, which has since removed it. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, located at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, has removed the video from its exhibition "The New Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles," which is currently on display.

In Newark, the Gallery Aectro, an independent art gallery, removed the video after the artist's dealer, P.O.W. in New York, showed the video at the first art gallery to display it, the New Museum in Washington, D.C.

More institutions contact the artist's dealer, P.O.W. in New York, showing the video and asking about the possibility of showing it in their galleries.

Smithsonian's decision to remove the video from its exhibition, "Hide/Speak," has sparked controversy, with some critics arguing that the museum was overreacting to a controversial work of art.

For us, it was almost an organically-developed decision," said the curator, who explained that the museum was responding to the needs of the local community.

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had been working for several months on a sound piece called "Elevator Music." The piece, organized by a guest curator, Adam Trowbridge (who teaches at the school of the Art Institute in Chicago), included music sent in by artists from around the country to play in Aferro's freight elevator.

"And one of the submissions," Wilcox said, "was from 3 Teens Kill 4, the band Wojnarowicz had played with in the 1980s. The surviving members of the band sent us a track from 1981 that David had worked on. Right as we were preparing to ship the CD of music for the project, the Smithsonian pulled 'A Fire in My Belly.'

"Look, we have faith in our community," Wilcox continued. "We're fine with disagreement. But to just pull the video, after a thinly veiled threat to a museum in a time when museums are struggling, is simply the wrong decision. We want more discussion, more dialogue."

SURPRISING SILENCE

Only one member of the board at the National Portrait Gallery has resigned in protest of the removal. And while many contemporary art museums and institutions have added to the protest by showing Wojnarowicz's video, the silence so far from New York's four biggest venues — the MoMA, the Guggenheim, the Metropolitan Museum and the Whitney Museum — is striking.

Nevertheless, the acquiescence to censorship by a major art museum clearly has touched a nerve in the visual arts community, which is suffering from severe cuts in public financing just like schools, police and almost every other area of government expenditure (except the military).

Frustration and anger over these setbacks in the visual arts community, which suffers from at least as many run-ins over issues of free speech as the rest of the arts put together, was close to boiling over anyway.

On Monday, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts sent a letter to G. Wayne Glouch, secretary of the Smithsonian, threatening to stop its financial support for the national museum's exhibition program if it did not restore "A Fire in My Belly" to "Hide/Seek." (The Warhol Foundation contributed $100,000 to support the show.)

Opposition to censorship often unites disparate members of the fine arts community, and this controversy, over an artist who died of AIDS 18 years ago, had the added goad of seeming to be déjà vu all over again.

Back in 1989, the Rev. Donald Wildmon, a Methodist minister and founder of the American Family Association, lost a lawsuit to Wojnarowicz for editing and misrepresenting his work in a pamphlet he sent to every member of Congress, many media outlets and conservative leaders around the nation.

That decision was hailed by artists as a great victory for artistic freedom and made a hero of Wojnarowicz, who knew he was HIV-positive at the time.

One of his most famous images is a self-portrait with shoelaces Photoshopped to look as if they were sewing his lips shut.

Many of the protesters against banning "A Fire in My Belly" have carried hand-held masks made of that image at events in Washington and elsewhere.

FAMILIAR IMAGERY

Certainly the contretemps over "A Fire in My Belly" has made the video available, through the internet (at HideSeek.org and at the Facebook page Support Hide/Seek) as well as the many art institutions, to lots more people than the exhibit alone ever could. Some versions of the video include brief nudity, but the part that sparked Donohue's anger is a quick scene of ants crawling over a crucifix, located near the midpoint of the four-minute version of "A Fire in My Belly."

That this clip has caused such offense is curious, since the image of a crucifix sharing the picture frame with ants is actually not unknown in modern art.

Salvador Dali believed ants represented corruption, and painted them frequently; his many crucifixions, like the "Corpus Hypercubus" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, have nonetheless won acceptance from many of the faithful over time.

Besides, though crucifixions have changed throughout history, the trend has actually been toward a more graphic depiction of corruption and degradation.
At the beginning of the Christian era, for example, Christ was usually shown clothed on the cross, even wearing fine robes and a crown, to emphasize his triumph over death.

Representations of Christ’s naked and tortured body, meant to convey divine sympathy with human suffering, only became common in the 10th century. From time to time over subsequent eras, particularly in the German and Spanish traditions, gruesome and quite disturbing images of hideous wounds and appalling humiliations of Christ’s flesh, rendered in realistic detail, have been popular and won Church approval.

And of course, Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ,” which showed crucifixion as a gory and some thought masochistic display, was hugely popular with devout conservatives in 2004.

The difference here is that “A Fire in My Belly” is clearly about the corruption AIDS has brought to Wojnarowicz’s body, and the crucifix is meant to express sympathy not just for humankind’s generalized suffering but for the horror and loss caused by the epidemic.

Wojnarowicz’s life story — abandoned as a toddler, shifted from home to home, becoming a gay prostitute and then an AIDS activist and world-famous artist — is inimical to many conservatives, but he did attend a Catholic grade school, and his frequent use of Catholic imagery is in that sense entirely legitimate. Even historically accurate.

“I was raised a Catholic, and so was Mapplethorpe, for that matter,” says Andres Serrano, whose “Piss Christ,” a photo of a crucifix in a jar of urine, became a political scandal in 1989, leading to major changes at the National Endowment for the Humanities, which had partly sponsored a competition the photo won.

“Artists don’t go out of their way to be blasphemous. People say we are all the time, though — they said Caravaggio was blasphemous in his day.

“The real point here,” Serrano says, “is that any censorship is bad censorship. All it does is weaken the institution.

“The National Portrait Gallery has just delivered itself a blow. Getting rid of the video won’t make the people who started this go away. It will just empower them to complain about more and more art every time the gallery shows it.”

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