

Civic Engagement or “Censorship:” The Brooklyn Museum’s *Sensation* Exhibit

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Over the centuries, museums have shown themselves to be vulnerable to external influences. In 19th century Europe, museums were developed to display and celebrate the wealth and power of great sovereign nations. In the early 20th century, museums were sometimes entirely controlled by governments, such as in the former Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, and were used to educate and control the population accordingly. In the late 20th century, the number of museums increased dramatically, and museums seemed to gain more freedom than ever to act independently. The public may believe that today museums in our democratic society are operating as ethical public institutions and are pursuing educational missions for the greater good of society. But is that really true? Can we assume that the museums of today are operating in an ethical and appropriate way as centers of civic engagement?

The financial operation of museums today is very complicated. Most North American museums are public non-profit organizations that raise funds from a variety of sources including government subsidies, private contributions and membership and admission fees. Special and temporary exhibitions may be of a lighter or more entertaining character and are often good opportunities for a museum to expand its audience and bring in increased revenue. When a museum aims to expand the vision of visitors with a thought-provoking exhibition, the special exhibition may be experimental and controversial. The controversial exhibit may stimulate civic dialogue, though there is a risk that the museum may gain unfavorable public attention. When deciding whether to present a potentially controversial exhibition, a museum must anticipate and consider this risk carefully to avoid possible damage to the museum’s reputation.

The Brooklyn Museum’s *Sensation* exhibition received widespread public attention and extreme reactions from diverse sections of society. The controversy over *Sensation* revealed many controlling factors that can affect a museum’s direction and possibly change its social role, including the interests of the government, the media, the public, and the relationship between the museum’s and the donor’s interests. *Sensation* is a quintessential case study that uncovers many problems that a museum confronts in a democratic society, and therefore helps us to understand how difficult and important it is for a museum of today to establish and maintain its own direction.

“*Sensation: Young British Art from the Saatchi Collection*” was a circulating exhibition of a contemporary art collection belonging to British advertising executive Charles Saatchi. The exhibition opened at the Royal Academy of London in 1997, then traveled to the Hamburger Bahnhof Contemporary Art Space of Berlin in 1998, finally arriving at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York in the fall of 1999. The show consisted of nearly a hundred paintings, photographs, sculptures, and multimedia works representing a new generation of forty-two British artists. Much of the subject matter was seen as highly controversial, including depictions of the Virgin Mary, a murderer, sliced animals, a hyper-realistic rendering of nude a dead body, and sexuality.

When the show was first presented in London, it caused a violent controversy that brought resignations from members of the Royal Academy.¹ The London newspaper *The Independent* reported that on the opening day of the exhibition there was shattered glass,

megaphones, placards, confusion and bewilderment.² Two canisters of ink and an egg were thrown at Marcus Harvey's portrait of the 1960s English child murderer *Myra Hindley*, which was composed from children's handprints. *Myra Hindley* gathered the most attention at the London exhibition, and was criticized for trivializing the victims' suffering and glorifying Hindley's crimes. As a result of this controversy, the show attracted 350,000 visitors during the term of the exhibition, creating a huge audience for the art works of the Saatchi collection. It substantially increased the value of and demand for the works of young British artists from the Saatchi collection at Christie's in the London market.³ When *Sensation* was presented the next year in Berlin, it was popular though less controversial. Nonetheless, the exhibit's run was extended to accommodate the masses of curious museum-goers.⁴

Sensation came to New York in 1999, where it was likewise found to be offensive by many groups of people. It was widely reported that New York City Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani condemned Chris Ofili's painting as blasphemous and threatened to cut off all city subsidies to the Brooklyn Museum of Art unless it canceled the entire exhibition. Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* depicted a black Madonna with a clump of elephant dung affixed to her breast, surrounded by pictures clipped from pornographic magazines. Museum Director Arnold L. Lehman brought this case to court, where the mayor's attempt at censorship was rejected. Generally, the news media portrayed the situation to be an inappropriate attempt by Giuliani to censor contemporary art and close down civic dialogue. This court battle gained great public attention, and the museum played the dramatic role of a hero protecting artists' freedom of expression.

At this point, if the museum's aim was to gain larger audiences and to open up civic dialogue, it was absolutely successful. The show recorded over 170,000 visitors during the four-month run – the largest attendance at the museum in over a hundred years.⁵ It provided people with great opportunities to contemplate the definition of art, the subjects of contemporary art, and the importance of freedom of speech versus the danger of censorship by the government.

However, there is a question as to whether the museum was really interested in presenting the exhibition for educational purposes. Regarding the controversy over Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, there is a little-known interpretation of the artist's native African custom, which likely would have inspired intellectual civic dialogue and cross-cultural understanding. In Africa, treatment with a dung poultice is believed to help women suffering from inflammation of their breasts after childbirth.⁶ But when one observes the whole controversy related to *Sensation*, what is most apparent is the publicity-seeking behavior of the museum, and not any educational aspect of the art works in the show.

The museum's advertising strategy seems to have been an attempt to draw public curiosity. Children were restricted from admission, promotions read like health warnings on a cigarette pack, and even the court case may have been for the purpose of attracting public attention. Lehman must have known of the past controversy over this exhibition when it was shown at the Royal Academy of London, and it was entirely foreseeable that *Sensation* could receive similarly extreme attention in New York. So why did the museum decide to bring this controversial exhibition to Brooklyn?

Substantial financial benefits to the museum and to collector Charles Saatchi appear to have been a primary motive. As seen in the increased sale price of and demand for *Sensation* artists' works at Christie's after the show in London, it was obvious that the Brooklyn Museum exhibition would likewise improve the price and demand for these

artists' works in the New York market. Although museum officials publicly denied receiving financial support from Charles Saatchi, records showed that he was the single largest contributor, donating \$160,000 towards the cost of the exhibition.⁷ Moreover, Saatchi was given a major role in shaping the content of the exhibition, and even allowed to control major curatorial decisions such as how work should be installed and the size and proximity of protective shields.⁸ This situation resembles museum practices common under a dictatorship, when a museum does not have the right to decide what it displays. In the Brooklyn Museum's case, censorship was not committed by the government but by a private donor, while the court decision kept the government from ending its subsidies to the museum.

The controversy over *Sensation* laid bare questions about the relationships between museums, their patrons, artists, and the interconnected financial interests of these parties. Furthermore, *Sensation* suggested the unfavorable possible transformation of a museum's character from a public educational institution into a profit-oriented showcase. The failure of Mayor Giuliani's attempt at censorship did not mean that the museum was assured of continuing to receive government subsidies as a long-term source of income, but rather that the government had received the message to be careful about getting into arts funding. Once a museum loses government support, it might be tempted to permit a greater use of the museum as a showcase in order to solicit private funds. Although some reports showed that Brooklyn Museum membership increased after *Sensation*,⁹ that increase might well be temporary.

Sensation prompted a reassessment of the relationship between art and commerce. In November 2001, the American Association of Museums issued a set of guidelines counselling museums to carefully consider the appropriateness of accepting contributions from donors with a private commercial interest in public displays of art.¹⁰ We have to conclude that museums are still vulnerable to external influences, mainly financial interests. Museums must continue their efforts to meet the highest ethical standards.

¹ "How German See the Brits," *Art Newspaper*, vol. 10, no. 86, November, 1998, p. 15.

² Tamsin Blanchard, "Sensation as Ink and Egg Are Thrown...," *The Independent* (London), September 19, 1997, p. 11.

³ James Cuno, "The Ethics of Funding Exhibitions," *Unsettling "Sensation": Arts-Policy Lessons from the Brooklyn Museum of Art Controversy*, Lawrence Rothfield, ed., pp. 162-68.

⁴ *Art Newspaper*, p. 15.

⁵ Joel Baxter, "Sensation," *New Art Examiner*, vol. 27, no. 4, p. 36.

⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Offending Images," in *Unsettling "Sensation"*, Lawrence Rothfield, ed., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001, p. 123; Steven C. Dubin, *Displays of Power*, New York: NYU Press, 1999, p. 254.

⁷ Baxter, p. 36.

⁸ David Barstow, "Brooklyn Museum Is Cautious, as Giuliani Looks to November," *New York Times*, March 29, 2000, p. B1.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Irvin Molotsky, "New Ethical Standard Set for Museums," *New York Times*, November 17, 2001, p. A15.