

JAMES BECK

**RUDI GIULIANO IL GIULIARO:
IMPLICATIONS OF ‘SENSATION’**

The controversy that has erupted over the Brooklyn Museum’s exhibition of Young British Artists has passionately occupied the media and the art world in its diverse guises. It also involves questions that are covered by the mission of ArtWatch International.

A single factor, at least, should be regarded as beyond discussion: the absolute freedom of artists, or anyone else for that matter, to create whatever they wish, in whatever mode they favor, dealing with any subject they chose and to employ materials they find fitting. If people are offended over possible religious slanders, if the animal rights lobbies are upset, if the sexual orientation advocates, the gun controllers, national or racial groups feel mistreated is beside the point. Freedom must be regarded as a given in any discussion or debate about art. People who should know, have been wrong for centuries. Surrounding issues, however, are quite another matter.

One of them is to evaluate the role of government in presenting and favoring one or another movement, direction, current or style of art over any other. Yet, for facing this question, a sub issue should be faced. A distinction should be drawn between the Brooklyn Museum, the Metropolitan and other institutions that are traditionally devoted to the guardianship of past treasures and art galleries where works are sold. In a further refinement of this distinction there are public institutions devoted specifically to modern and contemporary art, and their participation may be different.

Should those in the first category, like the Met and the

Washington National Gallery, its counter part in London, the Louvre and New York's own Frick, be involved in the propagation of current art, or does such an operation move beyond their mission? Of course the great traditional museums are reluctant to miss out on the public relations potentialities of a contemporary show, especially a sensational one. Personally, I believe that they should not be in that area of art at all, although for museums like the Guggenheim, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney, the discourse is quite different. Private patrons and sponsors are free to select what they wish, a practice known throughout history. If Cosimo de' Medici wanted to hire Donatello, he did. Period. No selection committees, juries, efforts at ethic or gender balancing. Private patrons have always supported what they preferred and failed to support what they did not want or like. No one would propose to force private patrons to do otherwise under the same requirements of freedom of choice that gives the artists the right to create what they wish.

But is freedom of choice is applicable to government as well as private individuals? If no such liberty is allocated to public institutions, then on what basis can any museum exhibit certain artists and fail to show others artists? Of course, the museums use their own judgment and chose all the time, with trustees, outside committees, boards of trustees, curators making the crucial decisions possibly along with the store managers. Inevitably some artists are left out all the time, certain styles or artistic directions are never included. These are regarded as out of the loop, antiquated, not politically correct, or too politically correct, too sexual explicit. Obviously choices are made all the time in public, not-for-profit institutions. The question may be raised: should government be in that activity at all? The process that surrounds the Brooklyn Museum exhibition beginning with its selection and subsequently in seeking publicity, media coverage, news items, editorials, etc. is hardly unique. The goals "Sensation" are pretty much the norm, being identical, I maintain, identical to those regularly employed by Brooklyn's sister institutions, including the most sacred cow of them all, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

It is undoubtedly part of what might be called the “Blockbuster mentality”. This type of operation is the representative mode of presenting art in the United States, the United Kingdom and is the envy of the rest of the western world. (Ironically the Brooklyn show had its origins in the Tate of London.) The motivations of such an event are clear enough. They are structured to enhance careers and reputations for exhibiting artists, museum directors, curators, art galleries, auction houses, and collectors. This is general practice, in which auction galleries [Christie’s is Brooklyn’s sponsor in this one], collectors [Charles Saatchi’s holdings are being shown], potential donors, powerful business people, politicians, and socialites all participate. Our society is so deeply conditioned by media exposure that one has to admit that the Sensation operation has worked to the letter. Let us not forget that behind it all is money, derived from the sale of tickets, the rental of those odious ear phones, the expanded sales in the museum shops, which create as they always do, a special line for each big show. “Merchandising” is the term heard in museums boardrooms and directors offices everywhere. The museum benefits from a successful show in terms of increased gifts to the endowments and generally more exposure for the spectacle. In fact everybody seems to benefit financially from “Etruscans”, “Pharaohs”, “Byzantines”, “Caravaggio”, “Ingres”. And miracle of miracles: they are sometimes very fine exhibitions, almost as if by accident. The observation which has been neglected in the discussion, then, to repeat, is that all museums do the same thing that the Brooklyn Museum has done, or at least they aspire to do so. Forget about the veneer of scholarly paraphernalia thrown into the mix to give an exhibition added credibility. A unreadable catalogue that weighs five or six pounds is one more item upon which to turn a profit is part of the production. The Metropolitan is the past master of art commerce. It has scores of points of sale within the museum itself, plus 14 stores outside of the sacrosanct halls, in many states. The need for funding in all art museums is very real, especially if you need to prepare for yet another expensive Blockbuster. And the company store has been one of the best ways to get it, so that

more often than not the tail tends to be wagging the dog.

On further point seem s in order. Consider the content the show, which caused such indignation on the part of Filippa de Montebello who regarded it as bad art, and Mayor Giuliano, his landlord and a board member at the Met. Where the two missed the point entirely is not understanding that however apparently outrageous the objects seem when described, there is nothing new or revolutionary about the category of art object exhibited. In fact, Sensation represent the main stream. The principle ingredients, simplistically can be regarded as a combination of Neo-Dadaism and Abstractionism with a smattering of Performance, has dominated the art world for up to three quarters of a century.

Thus, the style of art exhibited may be defined as “Academic Avant Garde”. What the Brooklyn show reflects is the entrenched manner that wins all the prizes, dominates the main international exhibitions, commands the highest prices at auction sales. This art sold which in the best galleries has been taught for decades in the art schools, and even analyzed and explained in the most popular Art History courses in colleges and universities in Britain and America. This kind of art has gained the total support of NEA committees, International Art Fairs, and art prizes (like the Turner Prize in London).

As with any deeply entrenched style, once in place it is difficult to dislodge, for the vested interests in it become almost insurmountable. Thus Giuliano’s challenge, as uneducated as it is, has been irritating to the Establishment. Forget about the freedom of expression issue for the moment. Montebello’s specified attack of a contemporary American artist seems to me in particularly poor taste on its own, and ironically she is represented in his museum

There are gigantic interests and plenty of money involved at every step of the way. If you put a cleaved fatty porker in glass cases preserved with an obnoxious fluid and call it art, that is enough. After all, ever since a urinal was dubbed art by Marcel Duchamp with the claim that if he calls it art, it is, remains the

battle cry. A pleasant flower picture hasn't a chance. [and may be it shouldn't, but that is entirely another matter!]. The action against the Brooklyn show turns out to be, surely unknowingly, an attack upon the entrenched art establishment. Phrases like "If I can do it, it isn't art", "a monkey can paint that", or "I know what a like", are as old as they are hollow. The criticism is an unsophisticated attack on Main Stream Modernism.