

The New York Times

2001 The New York Times

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2001

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Affronted by Nude 'Last Supper,' Giuliani Calls for Decency Panel

By ELISABETH BUMILLER

Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani said yesterday that an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art that includes a color photograph of a nude woman in Christ's place at the Last Supper was "disgusting," "outrageous" and "anti-Catholic." Then he declared that he would appoint a commission to set "decency standards" to keep such work out of museums that receive public money.

Virtually every museum in New York City receives city money.

Mr. Giuliani, who tried to shut down the Brooklyn Museum in 1999 over the "Sensation" exhibition, which included a painting depicting the Virgin Mary with a dollop of elephant dung on one breast, said that even though he had lost that case in court, he was considering filing suit again.

If he did, he said, he might base his argument on a 1998 Supreme Court ruling that endorsed what the mayor called "decency standards" for the National Endowment for the Arts.

"I'm going to look at what penalties are available for this," Mr. Giuliani said at a news conference at City Hall. Just as in 1999, he was reacting to large headlines and pictures in The Daily News without having seen the exhibition itself. He added that he and his lawyers would be investigat-

ing "a way to get this dispute to the place where I think we could win it, which would be the Supreme Court of the United States."

The Supreme Court ruling that the mayor cited did not in fact set up decency standards for the exhibition of art in museums that receive public money. Instead, it upheld a Congressional decency test for awarding federal arts grants.

The court also found that if the law was invoked to impose "a penalty on disfavored viewpoints," it would violate the First Amendment.

Mr. Giuliani, who is Roman Catholic, said he had "a few ideas" about who might serve on his decency committee. He added, laughing slightly, that they should be "basically decent people."

The mayor's remarks were greeted with some bewilderment by other city politicians. "That sounds like Berlin in 1939," said the Bronx borough president, Fernando Ferrer, a mayoral candidate.

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Critic's Notebook

Making and Taking Offense, Elevated to Art Form

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Again? Publicity and political gain having become ends in themselves in our sorry cultural wars, the bait is once more being dangled. Wouldn't it be nice to take a pass occasionally?

Unbelievably, the Brooklyn Museum has got itself into another scrap with Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani and the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, again fueled by the media, the issue again being a work by an artist who uses religious provocation to attract attention. And again the fallout will probably end up hurting other people more than the parties involved.

Yesterday, responding to what he described as a "pattern of anti-Catholicism at the Brooklyn Museum," the mayor decided he was going to put together a "task force or a commission" to "set decency standards for those institutions that are using your money, the taxpayers' money." So now other New York museums and defenders of the First Amendment will again be compelled to fight on Brooklyn's behalf for their own sake, some of them still holding their noses from "Sensation." Never mind the cost to taxpayers of a new commission, more lawsuits and anguish.

In 1999, the issue was Chris Ofili's "Holy Virgin Mary," of elephant dung, fame. Now it is Renée Cox's

SIZING UP THE EXHIBITION

Accessibility is written all over the show, which mostly maps ordinary life but with the heat turned up now and then. A review by Holland Cotter. Weekend, Page E36.

"Yo Mama's Last Supper," a large five-panel photograph made in 1996, in which the naked Ms. Cox, arms outstretched, poses as the figure of Jesus. We should note that the work had been making the rounds of the art world, including a stop during the 1999 Venice Biennale at the tiny Oratorio di San Ludovico, a 16th-century church. Before that, it was in a show at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Conn. There wasn't a peep from religious groups or politicians, and not much comment by art critics, either.

But as in the real estate business, location is everything. There is no better spot to get noticed if you are taking aim at the Roman Catholic Church these days than the once attention-starved Brooklyn Museum.

And, as if toward that end, in The Daily News on Thursday Ms. Cox reportedly said: "I grew up Catholic. Being a Catholic — they are about business. Money. I don't believe in all the philosophy and how it's set up."

She added: "Catholics had no interest in the abolition of slavery."

Then Barbara Millstein, a curator of "Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers," in which Ms. Cox's work appears, said about the mayor, "I don't think he's running for office this year, so I doubt there will be any problems."

Were they asking for trouble? We might chalk up such talk as New York patois, suiting the tabloid mentality of a city where people make a sport out of taking offense or giving it. The mayor ensured that Ms. Cox and the museum got the attention they seemed to desire by firing back. And a work of art that should never have been news to begin with escalated into another debacle.

The art world, for its part, is inclined to skewer certain groups although not others — and, as during the Ofili brouhaha, it is fair to wonder: would the defenders of a work like Ms. Cox's react similarly if a contested image were of Martin Luther King rather than Jesus?

On the other hand, we might ask whether it is a meaningless coincidence that the two works at the museum most vigorously attacked by the Catholic League and the mayor happen to be by black artists showing black women? You may recall that in "Sensation" there was a work

by Sam Taylor-Wood, a British woman, which was comparatively uncontroversial: "Wrecked" (1996) is a large photograph of the Last Supper in which the figure of Jesus, arms outstretched, is replaced by a woman who is topless. She is white.

Why the different reactions? The title? The quantity of skin? Race?

Art thrives on provocation. That is frequently its purpose and value. It seems absurd to have to repeat this, or underscore how history is full of art that uses iconic images, religious and otherwise, for ironic and unorthodox purposes. Sometimes this art becomes iconic, too. Jasper Johns's American flags. Duchamp's Mona Lisa. Veronese's "Feast in the House of Levi" is the textbook example: Venetian inquisitors complained that a Last Supper he painted contained liveried black pages, turbaned Muslims and a dwarf holding a parrot. So he changed the title. Voilà. A masterpiece of the Italian Renaissance.

"Yo Mama's Last Supper" isn't a masterpiece but, for better or worse, neither does it exceed the bounds of normal provocation today. Some people might even find it amusing — humor, like taste generally in art, being ultimately a private matter.

Unfortunately, there is nothing funny about the culture wars it has now rekindled.

Giuliani Calls For Panel On Decency

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Gov. George E. Pataki said that while he was offended by the photograph, he was wary of a decency commission. "I'm very reluctant about the government coming in and setting standards that have to apply," he said on his radio program on WCBS-AM, "Ask the Governor."

The exhibition, a collection of 188 photographs by 94 black photographers, was organized by the museum itself and is not scheduled to travel. But the Last Supper photograph that offended Mr. Giuliani has been exhibited elsewhere, to no uproar.

That photograph, a 15-foot panel called "Yo Mama's Last Supper" by Renée Cox, was shown in 1996 at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Conn. "We were prepared for a fuss, to be frank," said the Aldrich's director, Harry Philbrick. "And none came."

The nude picture, which is of the photographer herself surrounded by 12 apostles, was also shown in 1999 at a church in Venice. "Get over it," Ms. Cox said yesterday of the mayor's reaction, adding, "I don't produce work that necessarily looks good over somebody's couch."

The Brooklyn Museum had only a muted response yesterday to Mr. Giuliani's remarks. "While many of these works are beautiful and easy to enjoy, others may be controversial and difficult for us as viewers," the museum's director, Arnold L. Lehman, said in a statement. "Throughout history, the artist's responsibility has been to make us think."

Museum officials maintained that they were trying to avoid the kind of war that raged between the museum and City Hall in 1999, a dispute that



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Renée Cox, with her work "Yo Mama's Last Supper," which led Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani to propose a decency panel to oversee the suitability of works in publicly financed museums. Ms. Cox said, "Get over it."

was finally settled in a court agreement last year. In November 1999, a federal judge ruled that Mr. Giuliani had violated the First Amendment when he cut city funds to the museum and began eviction proceedings against it.

But the publicity surrounding "Sensation," most of it generated by the mayor's attacks, ultimately attracted 175,000 viewers to the museum — not a record, museum officials said, but close. Mr. Giuliani charged yesterday that the museum had mounted the current exhibition to get the same kind of publicity.

"They do it on purpose; they do it to get more attention," Mr. Giuliani said. "The problem with it is, if you allow people to continue to do it and not react to it, then it's just going to get worse and worse and worse."

Museum officials said yesterday that they had not expected the ire of the mayor this time. Restricted by term limits, Mr. Giuliani has 10

months left in office. The mayor, museum officials said, was the one seeking attention.

Mr. Giuliani's motives were a source of debate yesterday, particularly because he has no plans to run for office in the immediate future. In 1999, the mayor used his battle against the Brooklyn Museum in one of his successful fund-raising letters for his Senate campaign against Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Peter F. Vallone, the speaker of the City Council and a Roman Catholic who goes to Mass every morning, said he thought the mayor was reacting from his core beliefs. "This is the kind of issue that he can get very passionately involved in," said Mr. Vallone, adding that he was also offended by the exhibition but that the city should not play "culture cop." Mr. Vallone, who meets regularly with Mr. Giuliani, added that the mayor "feels he's on God's side."

The current Brooklyn Museum ex-

hibition also outraged the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, which was first alerted to the exhibition by a reporter for The Daily News, who called on Wednesday. "Then we immediately went out and purchased a copy of the book," said William Donohue, the president of the league, referring to the exhibition's catalog. Mr. Donohue said that although this exhibition was not as bad as "the filth of 'Sensation,'" he considered Ms. Cox's photograph nothing more than "shock art."

Other museums in the city reacted with measured alarm to Mr. Giuliani's plans for a decency committee.

Philippe de Montebello, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which receives 14 percent of its \$142 million annual operating budget from the city, said such a panel would be "regrettable" and would "erode the reputation of New York City as a global capital of culture."