

Whitewashing the Art World: What's Behind the Climate Of Censorship

By **Alexandra Peers**

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The art world has a reputation as free-thinking and tolerant, if not overly so. But in recent weeks, there have been several instances, far more than usual, of alleged censorship involving some of the bigger names in the field. What's going on?



Study of Perspective Series by Ai Weiwei.

To recap:

- On Tuesday, Jan. 11, the Shanghai studio of artist and human rights activist Ai Weiwei was demolished by the local government. His works and statements, often critical of the communist regime and government officials, have in recent months resulted in his being placed under house arrest, blocked from leaving China and, in one instance, beaten by police.
- In late November, the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., removed a video from an exhibition after now-Speaker of the House John Boehner cautioned that the institution's federal funding could come under scrutiny if it didn't do so. The video, by artist David Wojnarowicz, featured ants crawling on a crucifix. In turn, the Andy Warhol Foundation, a major museum funder, announced that it will be cutting off all grants to Smithsonian-associated venues. New Museum director Lisa Phillips marched up Fifth Avenue with a group of protestors to

decry the Smithsonian's decision in front of its Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Design.

- In early December, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art director Jeffrey Deitch returned from Art Basel Miami Beach to find that Blu, a street artist who had been commissioned by the museum to create a mural, had already begun to paint. The huge mural included aisles of coffins draped with dollar bills. As the site of the mural was near an Asian-American veterans memorial, it was whitewashed overnight at the wish of the museum, leading to an outcry in some quarters.

On the face of it, these blue-pencil incidents have little in common in scope or intention. One arose from the actions of a communist regime; another in response to perceived sensitivity to a religious group; and the last one or two, arguably, curatorial discretion. Do they prove a climate of censorship—or just a rising sensitivity on the part of the viewing public?

Artist Leon Ferrari, who became something of an art-world cause célèbre five years ago when a judge in Buenos Aires ordered his exhibition closed, credited the current climate to an increasing polarization of opinion on the right and left. His exhibitions have been criticized by Latin American politicians and by the Catholic Church. (One of his most famous works, *Western-Christian Civilization*, shows Jesus strapped to a fighter jet.) "It seems like there are two kinds of people: Those who are with Jesus and those against," said Mr. Ferrari, who had a retrospective, "Tangled Alphabets," at the Museum of Modern Art in 2009. "Christ said, 'He that is not with me is against me,'" wrote Mr. Ferrari in an email. "But so did Mussolini."

In China, Ai Weiwei's studio was destroyed due to "a change of heart of the local Chinese government," said Larry Warsh, who has been collecting works by the artist for a decade. "It was an amazing structure that took years to build and plan and went away in one day." But not only communist governments make mistakes, he stressed. "The uproar with the Smithsonian, that's small-minded. The largest museums have the smallest minds sometimes." He cited "a heightened fear factor" lately for contemporary art.

Indeed, the Smithsonian's action was "an ominous sign" and "a reactionary response," said Charles Bergman, chairman of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, which had awarded the artist a grant in 1989, two years after he completed the contested video. The work was "appropriate content to the exhibition," said Mr. Bergman; at any rate, such decisions should be left to the curators.

It's no coincidence that all this is happening right now, said Andras Szanto, a

professor at the Sotheby's Institute and editor of *What Orwell Didn't Know: Propaganda and the New Face of American Politics*. "It is a time when most museums in the world are being built in the Far East and Middle East, countries which have had limited free expression in the past." Add to that a well-meaning desire by arts institutions to be "culturally sensitive," and you have a situation of aesthetic second-guessing. And the most insidious type of censorship is self-censorship, he noted, as institutions pre-emptively police themselves.

Some institutions are simply avoiding exhibitions with overtly political and sexual themes entirely, or cutting them off at the pass, as director Klaus Biensenbach did last year at P.S.1 when he cut off the electricity during an outrageous, urine-sprinkled performance art piece by Ann Liv Young. Indeed, there may be instances of over-reaction: Several institutions, without addressing the interesting issues of the video's alleged or potential offensiveness, have simply since started screening it in their galleries, some on a continuous loop.

Art collector James Hedges, president of Montage Finance, wrote a letter to the Smithsonian after the Wojnarowicz video was removed requesting the return of a Jack Pierson self-portrait he had loaned to the show. But he later reversed his stance, deciding to keep it there, he said. "The purpose of the show was to give voice to a community," he noted. (The topic of the National Portrait Gallery show, "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," was, in part, the contributions of gay artists.) Leaving the artwork on view made it a "tool for dialogue" about the issues raised, he said.

These issues are not black and white, but gray. Mr. Deitch's decision to remove the Blu mural was certainly intended to be sensitive to neighbor's concerns. And it was also a decision made internally, by curators, not in response to overtly political concerns.

And sometimes censorship is, apparently, actually desirable. Earlier this year, some retailers declined to display Kanye West's new album because the cover featured a work by George Condo that depicted a naked black man and white woman having sex. But Mr. Condo later told *The New Yorker* that the musician had specifically asked him to design a cover that would be banned.

Censorship is also publicity.

So, in this climate, what should artists be doing? Said artist Sue de Beer, whose confrontational and even gruesome work has been hotly debated: "I think that everyone in the studio should never think about those things. ... If you're passionate about a work, you fight to have it made, and fight to have it seen. The

burden is on the artist right now to make sure that they're producing the kind of work that they need to produce."

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