

## Art Thrust into the Public Sphere

To grasp the severity of the events I am about to describe, it is necessary to understand that in Chicago, unlike New York or other major cities, there is *one* cultural institution considered the most prestigious, and that is the Museum of the Art Institute of Chicago. Joined to it, physically and corporately, is the 125-year-old School of the Art Institute.

It is therefore that much more astounding to realize that on the morning of May 11, 1988, while a school committee of faculty and staff met to decide what to do about a student painting that was infuriating members of the City Council, nine African-American Chicago aldermen, in an unprecedented act, stormed the school. Three of them removed the painting in question from the lobby wall. They all marched it into the president's office and threatened to burn it on the spot. This was the beginning of the end of the school's revered status in the city and also of its political naiveté, both of which were put to rest for good the following spring, when the notorious flag incident once again rocked the school to its core.

In the first instance: As part of his entry in the traveling fellowship competition (an annual schoolwide exhibition that used to take place in the school's main building, physically connected to the museum), David Nelson, a graduating senior, hung a portrait of the late Mayor Harold Washington dressed in flimsy women's underwear. The painting was a provocative image—an overweight Washington, feet splayed to the sides, looking dumpy and ridiculous. As a self-defined iconoclast, the artist believed it was his responsibility to smash the image of Washington, who he thought had become far too elevated. It is no wonder the painting illicited such a dramatic response. Harold Washington, the first black mayor of Chicago, had died in office only months before of a sudden heart attack, leaving the city in turmoil; he had been greatly loved

by many Chicagoans, both black and white. Only minutes after the painting was hung, someone notified Chicago's City Council about the image. A group of enraged black aldermen then marched to the school—police, press, and minicams in tow—to chastise the student and the school for daring to show such a work. Once the aldermen removed the painting from the wall, tearing one corner in the process, a police lieutenant, acting on orders from the superintendent and attempting to forestall a riot, “arrested” the painting by taking it into custody. It was never shown at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago again.

The next day, various school instructors and officials, myself included (I was the school's Graduate Division chair at the time), flew to Springfield, the state capital, where our lobbyist had arranged for a meeting with the ten-member black legislative caucus to try to stop their proposed resolution to cut state and federal funding to both the school and the museum. Here the legislators evidenced having the same misconceptions that the aldermen had expressed. For one thing, both groups had confused the school with the museum. Each thought the painting had been bought by the museum (which is subsidized by Chicago Park District funds) to be displayed among the “great works” in its collection. These representatives also assumed that had it been a painting of a white political leader—Governor James Thompson, for example—it would have been removed immediately. We explained to them that in the history of the school we had never removed or refused to hang a painting because of content, no matter how intense the pressure. Concerns that the school was a racist institution were in no way assuaged, however. The caucus suggested that they themselves form a citywide multicultural board to help us make decisions about what student work to show. We of course rejected this proposal.

In all the three days spent resolving the first stages of this conflict there were seventeen bomb threats against the school and museum. There were also many demonstrations. The press was unrelenting in exploiting the situation. Ultimately, school officials agreed to take out full-page ads in major Chicago newspapers, apologizing not for the content of the painting but for any “distress” it might have caused those mourning the late mayor. But to this day we wish we had not bowed to the pressures exerted by the city and state at all. We at the school were severely criticized by members of the art community and the American Civil Liberties Union for not bringing suit against the aldermen immediately. They themselves still face a pending lawsuit filed by Nelson

against them.<sup>1</sup> But at the time our backs were against the wall. There was no precedent for what had occurred, and we still had a great deal more to learn about playing hardball with manipulative politicians.

The school's position was further complicated by the fact that there was some truth to the accusations of racial insensitivity and elitist isolation from the life of the inner city. The museum especially could easily be seen as a bastion of the white, male, Eurocentric art establishment. We did not believe the school "fostered" a racist environment or "encouraged" such a painting. But like most art schools, it was, and is, a predominantly white institution, with an 18 percent minority faculty, staff, and student body, which did not come close to reflecting the 57 percent combined black, Latino, Asian, and Native-American populations of Chicago. And we recognized that we had *not* done enough to engage the various multiethnic and racial communities of the city in the life of the school. To our credit, however, we began to change this situation immediately, both internally and externally, by hiring more minority faculty and staff while attempting rigorously to recruit a more diverse student body. We also began meeting with top African-American educators, gallery owners, and administrators in Chicago to elicit their help in changing the demographics and insular attitudes of the school and in helping to place our African-American students in good positions once out of school. But while busy attempting to act upon our own contradictions and guilt, we were too slow to grasp the local political implications of what was happening.<sup>2</sup>

This incident initially took only days to resolve, but it put great stress on many of our students, especially our minority students, faculty, and staff, who were caught between world views. As artists they understood the demand for unequivocal artistic freedom, but as people of color, some also felt the painting was racist and homophobic. Our gay students and faculty also found themselves caught in contradictions. There seemed to be no way to discuss these complex issues publicly. When one defended Nelson's right to make and display the work, the African-American community and the Hispanic community called such opinions insensitive and racist. If one questioned Nelson's motives, timing, and the homophobic nature of the piece, the art world saw this as censorship. Bowing to pressure from the art world and pressure from the African-American community, unwilling to risk further attack, we pulled in to protect ourselves, precisely when we should have opened up the school and the museum to real debate. And because this was the first such onslaught most of us had ever experienced, we took it to be an iso-

lated occurrence and naively thought we could relax when it was finally over. It had not been the criticism per se that we had feared, but rather the safety of our students, our relationship with Chicago's minority populations and the totality of the Chicago art community, of which we are a significant component. But it was not until School of the Art Institute student Scott Tyler unveiled his flag piece, nine months later, in February 1989, that the repercussions of this episode were truly felt. It was then also that we could see that in not fighting back aggressively when we were first attacked we had opened ourselves to further violation and manipulation.

The show in which Tyler's installation appeared, ironically, was a direct response to the events of the previous spring. The Ethnic American Student Union, of which Tyler was a member, had claimed that the "racist Washington painting" might never have been painted were there a greater black presence at the school. We all agreed that there was a need for a multicultural student show; however, when the slides for it were submitted, the faculty jury had some reservations about the legality of Tyler's installation, which positioned an American flag on the gallery floor, under a ledger inviting comments to the query: "What is the proper way to display a U.S. flag?" These words were printed above a small photomontage of flag-draped coffins and South Koreans burning an American flag. While writing in the ledger or looking at the montage the viewer could easily step on the flag. It was not the political statement of the piece that worried the jury, who had seen this type of work before; rather, it was its possible illegality. When the school's lawyers had vetted the piece, the jury chose it for the show.

This installation caused an even greater and more national controversy than did the Nelson painting, which had stirred a furor mostly in the Chicago area, and presented a whole new cast of characters, including local politician Edward Vrydolyak, whose failing mayoral campaign was looking for a boost, and Illinois state Senator Walter Dudytych, who sought to save the flag and enhance his career by erecting his own flagpole, stuck in a bucket of sand. There was no end to the absurd behavior mobilized in reaction to this piece. Tyler had his own political agenda, which fit perfectly with the opposition's worst nightmare image of a flag desecrater. He also knew how to play the media. Appearing often in person on TV and radio, he declared himself to be a member of the Revolutionary Communist Party. He wore a Che Guevara beret, a T-shirt decorated with a large portrait of Chairman Mao, and a Palestinian

scarf. He used words like *fascist* and *imperialist*, publicly likening flag fanaticism to Nazi worship of the swastika.

The combination of players was incendiary and somehow thousands of Chicagoans were convinced by trumped-up hysteria that this small student installation was the biggest problem facing them—far greater than inner-city crime, crack, homelessness, racism, toxic waste, cutbacks to public education. There, at the School of the Art Institute, for all to see, was a symbol of an attack on the American way of life. Even senior citizens in wheelchairs bought this line and organized against the school, as did Vietnam veterans and any number of other groups. The media loved this event, playing it for all they could, while the art community seemed unable to pose images of equal power to counter the popular fixation with the flag-on-the-floor. This unleashed rage put the school on the defensive once again, making us fearful of those who were attacking us. The level of protest was so intense and continued for so long that this time there was virtually no possibility of any coherent dialogue. Had we wanted to establish a rapport with these factions of the city—the Veterans of Foreign Wars, blue-collar workers, conservative suburbanites—we would have had to do so prior to this confrontation. The issue here was related to that of the Nelson painting incident: To whom did the image of the flag belong? Whose was it to use and interpret? Those who had fought to protect the “land of the free and home of the brave” thought it was theirs. Scott Tyler, enraged at American society, thought it was his.

Although the psychic pain of the Nelson painting, with its accompanying accusations of racism, caused the school more direct internal division, the flag piece cost it money. We estimate a cost to the school of several hundred thousand dollars in 1989, and in 1990, as a result of a freeze on Illinois Arts Council funding, the school lost considerably more, while the museum also suffered greatly. Ironically, that funding withheld by the arts council would have been used to supplement our most successful community outreach programs—the Video Data Bank, the Visiting Artists Program, the Film Center, and the BASICS Program, which sends artists into public schools to train instructors to teach art. There are probably donors who still refuse to give money to the museum as a result of these incidents. Even so, the school also made friends among some people who believe in freedom of expression and who continue to support the school as a result of the strong positions we have taken in refusing to remove the work. We may have regretted the pain the work had caused people and, in the case of the Nelson

painting, might even have questioned the merit of the work, but we have stood behind our students' right to exhibit it.

Certainly a great deal of good has come out of all this. We, as individuals and as an institution, have become somewhat smarter, stronger, more strategic as well as more collectively committed to academic freedom. We have concurrently become more critical of our own institution—of our method of training art students, which at times feeds their romantic, ahistorical notions about being an artist and does not help them understand the diversity of the world in which they live. Although the art community likes to talk about the “other” and multiculturalism, and is well versed in postmodernist theory, we at the school had to admit that the majority of our students did not have any idea how to cope with real diversity when angry leaders of the African-American community called them racists, or enraged veterans in camouflage garb reviled them as Communists.

We have also learned that we must wage a counter-offensive battle against our opponents. We need a revival of progressive muckraking in the form of writing, video, and film that will go after some of these politicians as they have gone after us, to challenge their credibility as they have challenged ours. We need to understand who they are, whom they represent, what their agenda is, and why we, the art world, are even on it. We need to politicize our response. I think, in fact, that this has been happening gradually, as the art community has addressed the issue of content in the Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe incidents in particular,<sup>3</sup> and has begun to recognize which works are being challenged and why. Related to this, the School of the Art Institute has adopted a more strategic approach to the media.

The school was accustomed to isolation, to its privileged place, and to talking primarily to the art world. *Political* and *controversial*, for many of our students and faculty, were terms designating art-world genres. Although there was much talk about doing so, few students or studio faculty had ever actually engaged a larger political arena in their work. Nor had they had to deal with work whose effect in the world they could not control. We certainly did not know how to *use* the media; we did not know how to keep our statements simple, to create our own sound bites, how to beat the media, the politicians, and an organized opposition at their own game. We presented ourselves defensively and offered an analysis too complex, sophisticated, or intellectual for the one-dimensional discourse of television. We finally brought in a consulting team to help us formulate a simple but coherent statement that the media

would pick up. What we ended up with was: "Don't Tread on the Bill of Rights."

As a result of these events, I personally have also come to understand that it is simply not enough to defend an artist's rights, on principle. This is why the response of Artists Space to a similar attack by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has been useful to all of us. They fought back by trying to explain the disputed work, its purpose, and its political context. Since the art world is now drawn into controversy daily, we should at least wrest back, and redefine, the terms of the controversy, using them to raise the questions *we* deem educationally important. This is why it was clearly dangerous for the National Endowment for the Arts to talk about the Serrano and Mapplethorpe funding as a small percentage of "mistakes" in a greater percentage of successes.<sup>4</sup> It misrepresented the issue, backed away from its own prior decisions, and betrayed the integrity of peer-panel judgment. Funding the work of such artists was never a mistake. It was based on careful, educated evaluation by serious artists of serious artists whose work broadens, stimulates, intensifies the public's understanding of art. There should be no apology or fear of work that provokes controversy and debate in a supposedly pluralistic and democratic society.

This brings us to two very basic problems: The first is that there is no clear, popular understanding of what art is and how it might ideally function in American society. A government agency, the NEA, does exist to administer minimal funds to institutions and individual artists, but there is no articulated consensus about the complex place and importance of art within this society. This has made both artists and the funding process vulnerable to ruthless politicians with their own agendas. In some European and Latin American countries artists and their work are *expected* to help raise the collective consciousness. Familiar with an avant-garde tradition that seeks to challenge daily life through art, these governments subsidize and protect their artists and generally manage to do so without demanding political loyalty from them. In this country, however, art is relegated to a place of nostalgic longing, high culture, or entertainment. Most people, if asked, would say that art exists to infuse the world with beauty and vitality. It is not understood, except by the art world itself, as a legitimate arena for controversy and debate. In this society, art is not defined within the arena of real power—namely, politics. But then, how is it that the art world now finds itself in the middle of a political debate?

The second problem, already alluded to, and endemic to democracy as practiced in the United States, is that there is no clear understanding of who the public is and no attempt made to define the idea of the public as a diverse body with often contradictory goals and desires, which the government must try to meet.

The fury hurled at us at the School of the Art Institute was and is misplaced. The real enemy is not one institution that trains young artists but rather this society, which has not satisfied dreams, which has made people feel out of control, has taken resonant images and used them up—to sell religion, products, synthetic ideals, and candidates, stripping all groups of any coherent cultural identity. How did it feel for Chicago's black community, having finally gained real political representation in a deeply segregated city, to lose Harold Washington? And how then did it feel to have his image lampooned by a young, white art student? The art world must be willing to address honestly the complexity of these issues as it also must examine the overdetermined meaning of the American flag for those who now feel their way of life is threatened or invalidated.

The dramas I have described, which we understood primarily as the machinations of Chicago politics, now have become national issues. Until these events, artists remained isolated and notoriously unorganized, without a power base, and therefore easy to target. But they are not so any longer. Artists are now fighting back, as they did at the Corcoran Gallery after the Mapplethorpe debacle. They are creating their own images and events—such as A Day Without Art and the National Art Emergency—powerful enough to challenge the media and the thinking of society about what art is, what artists are, and what the place of art in society might be. They are smashing the image of the withdrawn, self-absorbed, narcissistic artist. They are organizing on the issue of diversity and expanding the debate over censorship and First Amendment rights to include a more broadly based political critique of all that is not said, all that is not heard, while struggling to make the myth of American pluralism a reality.

### Notes

1. On 20 September 1994, as this book was being prepared for publication, a federal judge approved the city of Chicago's offer to settle the civil-rights lawsuit filed by David Nelson over the "arrest" of his painting *Mirth and Girth*. The



\$95,000 settlement will be paid by the city to the American Civil Liberties Union to cover a portion of the legal fees incurred in the ACLU's representation of Nelson in the case. Nelson's ACLU counsel in the case, Harvey Grossman, indicated that the organization would share an undisclosed portion of the settlement monies with the artist. In an attempt to avoid a similar situation, the city agreed to issue a detailed set of procedures to Chicago police defining the limited circumstances in which materials protected by the First Amendment could be confiscated. The three aldermen named in the suit also agreed not to appeal a 1992 federal court ruling that they had violated Nelson's constitutional rights when they removed his painting from its display at the school.

Left unresolved at the time of publication was whether the aldermen's considerable legal fees would be paid by the city. The aldermen twice had lost in appeals to the City Council's Finance Committee, which determined that they had not acted in any official capacity in their removal of the painting. The U.S. District Court Judge who approved the September 20 settlement could make a decision in that dispute as well. (See *Chicago Tribune*, 21 September 1994.)

2. For a more detailed accounting of this incident and the political implications underlying it, see "Private Fantasies Shape Public Events: And Public Events Invade and Shape Our Dreams," in part 2 of this volume.

3. See the next chapter, "When Cultures Come into Contention," for additional discussion about the controversial works of Serrano and Maplethorpe.

4. This summarizes an explanation that the NEA was still using in 1994 when work they had funded came under attack.