



**District of Columbia
Arts Center**

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DCAC Archive : Director's Letters March : April 2011

Much has been made lately about censorship, particularly relating to the exhibition that recently closed at the National Portrait Gallery. Now, don't get me wrong, I am against censorship in all forms. I signed petitions in protest to the exclusion of work from that exhibition and in doing so threw the whole of DCAC's support behind that protest. We don't hear as much about censorship these days as we did in the 80's when there was so much provocative work surfacing concerning AIDS. Many of those artists and their work were intentionally provocative, and every time a piece or show got censored it was a great cause for rallying and a terrific opportunity for publicity. At the very time of the founding of DC AC we experienced the Mapplethorpe protests on the steps of the Corcoran, and while it did little to harm the reputation or funding of the Corcoran, it certainly propelled the WPA into a national spotlight when they picked up the exhibition for their own gallery. So, in a sense, one gallery's shame is another gallery's glory. But in the end, the real question is: who can censor you? And I will tell you that the true answer is: your funder and yourself.

When in Florence you will see all the magnificent painting commissioned by the Medici family. It adorns walls, canvases and wood panels in every gallery, church and palace. And if you listen to any of the guides or read your history before you go, you hear that painters constantly had to change or redo their work to please their benefactors. They would have to include the likenesses of family members at the Crucifixion or turn city leaders into the Disciples of Jesus. Some paintings were too dark or had an atmosphere that the purchaser didn't particularly like. So, they changed them, sometimes changes were made by other artists long after the piece was installed, especially on murals. The artists accepted it all as a part of the business of painting. But in some cases, even after being told by the commissioner of a painting that it was unacceptable, the artist refused to change the work. They received no pay for it and hoped that someone else might find merit in the completed work, and there are examples of that in Florence as well. Some very well-known works in chapels were refused by their patrons. Again, one patron's trash is another one's masterpiece.

But in the modern age we see a different phenomenon, and I think it requires distinction: artists are not being censored as much as curators are being censored. This is only possible because it is the galleries, and as employees the curators, who actually have a benefactor who can say yes or no to their efforts. It is the Federal Government. In a way, I am grateful that the Federal Government does not commission or pay artists to create work that they can lay their non-existent aesthetic upon. Can you imagine if, as a painter or sculptor, you had to have your work

approved by the likes of Newt Gingrich or some other self-proclaimed arbiter of taste and value in order to get paid for commissioned work? Would Donald Judd's works have been turned into the building blocks of the Ten Commandments? Would Chuck Close be creating portraits of the GOP? I don't think so. Mainly because I think those artists, and in fact any artist worth their salt, would have told the Government to take a hike; that they will create what that they are inspired to create. And as long as they only sold that work to private collectors that would be great, but as we all know, a vast amount of modern and contemporary work is in the hands of public galleries. The city of the District of Columbia has been buying work by DC artists for years to exhibit in city buildings. The display of those works is at the whim of elected officials, and I don't think we have elected a city curator lately. If we take the two examples I have already mentioned, the Robert Mapplethorpe show and the David Wojnarowicz video, we see that neither of those artists were censored, in fact, they were both dead, and couldn't have changed their work if they wanted to. The work exists, and it can be seen and appreciated by anyone who will take the time and effort to seek it out, unlike the Florentine painters who had to replace their visions of the faces of the Disciples with stodgy city officials. Some of their inspiration never saw the light of day.

We cannot be surprised that members of Congress feel competent to weigh in on artistic matters and threaten funding. To be certain, they are a body of professional politicians elected by the smallest percentage of votes by an even smaller percentage of the population of the United States. Despite those mathematics, they feel they have been given a mandate by "The People" to protect us from anything that threatens what they perceive as the "moral fabric of America." And you may be assured (or maybe shocked to know) that the real censorship of our public galleries is deeply embedded within their policies and practices. Guidelines and restrictions on what can be exhibited and how it can be written about prohibit curators from showing work or discussing artists' lives truthfully. These restrictions, omissions and colorations are strictly enforced so as not offend their patrons, ie: members of Congress (no, not us). We must be mindfully aware that true censorship is never practiced openly. Whether it is in art, journalism, political activism, or the general pursuit of life, liberty and happiness; censorship thrives. It tears away at truth and critical thinking in the shadows while its proponents stride forth in the sunshine proclaiming their allegiance to "truth, justice, and the American way."

Whew, I'll bet you didn't expect all that today. Let me close this tirade by saying that it is thanks to arts organizations that are supported by private individuals and their donations that we battle this obsession with control. Of course, I would like to receive money from the government to support DCAC, I probably would be in no position to refuse it. But as things are today, we don't have to struggle with that issue. Thanks to the support of our members, attendance at our theater and fundraising events, we are managing to stay open. It's really hard, and believe me, we don't always make ends meet. Sometimes our staff goes without pay so we can keep our doors open until a little more money comes in. That's why our Board of Directors and our staff are so grateful to you for your annual contributions. It's always a little hard to believe when we hear a PBS station telling us that they might not be here tomorrow without your \$30 contribution, but when you hear that from DCAC, you can absolutely believe it. With

your help we will remain, and we will remain in service to artists and their vision; without censorship and without restriction. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

B Stanley,
Executive Director