

OPINION PAGES

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Total eclipse of the art

Our VIEW

Mayor shouldn't decide if museum gets funded

Mayor Don Wesely doesn't like the art show at the Sheldon (this is just for pretend, folks, Don doesn't really care about art ...). As a devout Theosophist, he objects to a particular painting of Krishnamurti as a topless dancer.

You can't really tell it's Krishnamurti, 'cause it's sort of abstract, but the picture's title, "Krishnamurti as a Topless Dancer," sort of gives it away.

The city's rich and established Theosophical population is outraged.

In a fit of pique, Wesely cuts city money earmarked for the gallery, totaling about a third of its budget, causing even more controversy.

Is this right?

Now, mind you, it's not a question of whether or not the city should be funding a museum. That's a settled issue, for the moment.

It isn't even a question of whether or not the museum should support such a scandalous show.

“Not even massive government bureaucracies can keep track of what offends everyone, nor should they try.

friends don't like the show?

And the answer to that question is:

Not unless he's the mayor of a medieval town.

In the America of the 20th century (such as it is), no one enjoys the right to go unoffended. Not even massive government bureaucracies can keep track of what offends everyone, nor should they try.

Your tax dollars already go to support programs and policies that you yourself would find morally offensive, even depraved ... if you only knew.

Of course, it's not Mayor Wesely we have to be afraid of; it's New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

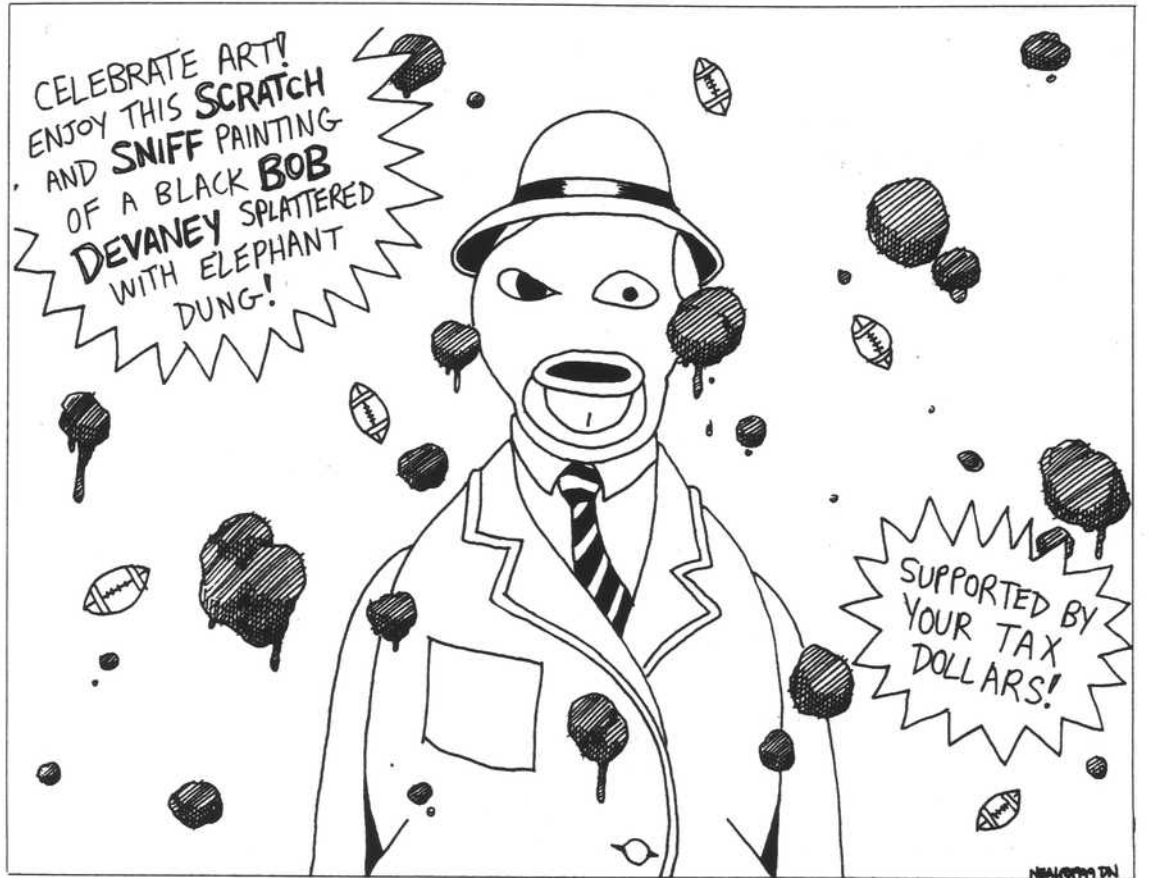
And it's not a topless Krishnamurti but a black Madonna with elephant dung and porno pictures.

Still, the premise remains the same: The mayor in this scenario is behaving a little too much like Lord of the Domain.

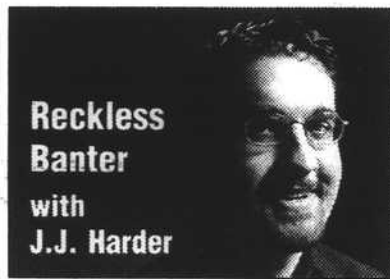
As mayors go, not many of them are art critics. They only know what they like.

But we've got to cut them short of shoving what they like (or don't) down the public throat.

Obermeyer's VIEW



The arts should be privately funded



Reckless Banter with J.J. Harder

It's not about the Virgin Mary or representing a constituency. It's not about racism or hype. And, no, it's not even about the feces. It's about a flawed mentality when it comes to funding the arts.

New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani recently cut city funding to a city museum because of an offensive exhibit. Giuliani withheld \$7 million in funds from the Brooklyn Museum of Art because of a painting that featured a black Virgin Mary covered with elephant dung and pornographic cutouts. The museum would not receive its money unless the exhibit was pulled.

The painting, entitled "Holy Virgin Mary," is just the highlight of the museum's risqué new exhibit. Among the other displays in the appropriately-titled "Sensation" were bisected pigs and cows preserved in formaldehyde and castrated male dummies.

Giuliani withheld the museum's annual subsidy - about one-third its yearly income - on the grounds that it could not charge admission in a city-owned building. The U.S. Senate followed suit and pulled \$500,000 of federal funds from the museum. The Senate could keep its money because the U.S. Supreme Court ruled last year that government could hold a "decency standard" in funding the arts.

The museum then proceeded to sue the city, and the city sued back. A national brouhaha exploded with Giuliani making appearances on talk shows and Catholics holding vigils outside the museum. Artists across the country began crying out "censorship," all while the museum stayed open.

Most people believe the entire controversy to be centered on Rudy G. standing by his constituents. After all, he is contemplating a run for Senate next year, and Catholics make up 44

percent of the state electorate. Cardinal John O'Connor, head of the New York Catholic archdiocese, called the painting an "attack on religion." Giuliani can only be seen as listening to the Catholics and paving his way to the Senate.

Others think the hubbub stems from the painting's racist undertones. The Mary in the painting is black, and many activists, such as the Rev. Dr. Hubert Daughtry, truly believe the exhibit to be racist. At the House of the Lord Pentecostal Church in Brooklyn, Daughtry told his congregation, "Europeans always see Africans negatively. It's not the feces, but the face. It's not the picture, it's the pigmentation."

Still others say the whole mess can be traced to a museum looking for attention. A record 9,200 visitors showed up on opening day to see the talked-about exhibit. The opening was the largest in the museum's 175-year history.

And while all of these factors contribute to the controversy, they really circumvent the actual problem, one that museum-defender Hillary Clinton hit right on the head: Government has to decide what is and is not art.

Governmental funding for the arts is supplied mainly by the National Endowment for the Arts and its state branches. The agency has been receiving less and less money since the 1992 high of nearly \$176 million. Today, federal support for the arts comes in at just under \$100 million annually.

In the early '90s, Congressional conservatives tried to cut off the NEA's funding because of controversial art similar to the recent Madonna. Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic art and the infamous crucifix immersed in urine by Andres Serrano produced a huge debate and the eventual high court ruling on a standard of decency.

Ever since these extreme types of art have been caught in the media's web, museums have been on their heels and governmental funds have been in doubt.

Presidential candidate Elizabeth Dole has taken a hard stance on federally supported arts. Besides referring to the "Sensation" exhibit as "very

offensive," she called for "strong guidelines" for the NEA. She even says funding for the NEA should be completely eliminated: "Yes, yes, phase down and out."

And she's right.

Because the government cannot discern between appropriate art and obscene art without discriminating against someone. If art is kept private, OK, but if the government is shelling out funds, at least some group will be offended.

Another offensive exhibit is now being displayed in Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art - except that the images that could be considered offensive are of the Hindu god Shiva. Hindus don't have the population of Catholics, so the museum keeps its funding.

It all goes back to the fact that the government should not be in the business of telling people what to think. And that's exactly what public art funds allow for.

Damien Hirst, another "Sensation" artist, said Mayor Giuliani "may as well say, 'I can only like Picasso, and if you don't show it, then I'm going to cut off your funding.' It's pure censorship."

And the "pure censorship" shouldn't be supported because of the good the arts do us. Sure, students who studied the arts scored an average of 83 points higher than non-arts students on the SAT. The NEA itself boasts "arts education improves self-esteem, teamwork, motivation and problem-solving." And the agency costs each American only about 36 cents a year.

But that's no reason for Uncle Sam to pay for the arts. The NEA says "the non-profit arts pump nearly \$37 billion into the economy every year," but that's not just because of the NEA. There are tons of other private groups nationwide that support the arts.

Educational programming is on channels besides PBS. And art galleries display whatever they deem art - dissected pigs, feces or whatever - through money they collect themselves.

Let those groups support the arts and censor themselves rather than having a government tell us what is and is not art. And try to keep the feces in the private sector for once.

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