

“Brooklyn Museum: Messing with the Sacred,” in Chris Ofili, Rizzoli, 2009

The Brooklyn Museum: Messing with the Sacred

Part I: The Event

Dennis Heiner a dapper, 72-year-old devout Catholic, feigning illness, leaned against a wall in the Brooklyn Museum near the much-maligned Chris Ofili painting, *The Holy Virgin Mary*. He waited for the guard to look away, took out a plastic bottle, then slipped behind the protective shield, and, with shaking hands, squeezed and spread white paint over the face and body of the image of Ofili’s black Madonna. When the police asked why had he done this, Mr. Heiner responded softly, “It was blasphemous.” With this enactment Chris Ofili’s work entered a historical body of defaced art--from works vandalized during the French Revolution to Michelangelo’s *Pieta* Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, and David Nelson’s infamous portrait of the late Mayor Harold Washington, *Mirth and Girth*. On December 18, 1999, Heiner was charged with a Class D felony for “mischief making, possessing instruments of graffiti, and graffiti.”

Let’s begin with the Brooklyn Museum, about which New York Times art critic Michael Kimmelman wrote: “Playing on the implications of cultural elitism, the Mayor of New York, Rudolph Guiliani, has in fact threatened one of the least elitist of New York cultural institutions.” While I was growing up in Brooklyn, the Brooklyn Museum was the beloved museum of my working-class neighborhood. It was always “our” museum. Through such recent comments as “That’s my museum. Take your hands off it,” spoken by Brooklyn residents, I can see that it is still our museum to the people of Brooklyn. This is enviable loyalty to an institution that probably serves the most ethnically and racially diverse population of any major museum. And it has done so since 1823. What was museum Director Arnold Lehman thinking when he committed his institution to “Sensation,”--a show that other American museums had refused and for which he could find no institutional partners? Whom was he attempting to please, and what audience was he hoping to attract?

Lehman knew the history of the show's reception at the Royal Academy of London - its controversies and its vandalisms, particularly in response to Marcus Harvey's rendering of the face of Myra Hindley, the notorious child murderer, in what appears to be small children's handprints. That painting outraged many, who saw its inclusion as an act of bad taste, and it was splattered with ink and eggs in London. Aware of the show's record-breaking London attendance, no doubt Lehman hoped to draw similar large crowds, but also to attract a new audience--younger, more hip, first-time museum goers from Sheepshead Bay, Canarsie, Bensonhurst, and East Flatbush. Perhaps he also thought that curiosity about this show could entice those from Manhattan to cross the famous bridge that separates the boroughs and the classes and travel a little farther into Brooklyn than BAM (the Brooklyn Academy of Music). Wanting to position the museum as a player in the contemporary art conversation, it is likely he also hoped to appeal to his own new constituency - the now thousands of young artists displaced by Manhattan's high-cost real estate and the numerous not-so-young artists and professionals who are increasingly making Brooklyn their home. If he hoped this show was dynamic enough to do all this, he was right--much to the surprise of the more jaded art world establishment to whom the show was old news. Did Lehman go too far? Did he compromise his institution and overly sensationalize "Sensation"? The pre-show publicity and the signage at the show read as follows: This exhibition "may cause shock, vomiting, confusion, panic, euphoria, and anxiety." The show was presented as if it were some pharmaceutical drug with possible side effects or an amusement park ride to be tried at one's own risk. But the only one who suffered all these symptoms was probably Lehman himself. The day I was there not only did no one faint, but everyone was having a great time, especially the museum guards who seemed thrilled to talk about and explain the art to anyone who would listen.

In addition to the buzz about the show's content, there was a lot of attention focused on the well-documented, endless compromises with collector Charles Saatchi, the wealthy former advertising executive: How much money would he give to the exhibition and under what conditions? How should the show be hung? How big and how close would the shield be to protect Ofili's Holy Virgin Mary? And what about David Bowie's contributions and

Christie's expectations about deacquisition prospects and future sales? Everyone, it seemed, would make a profit from this show. In the end, perhaps worst of all was Lehman's unfortunate misrepresentations surrounding Saatchi's financial involvement, which probably proved the most damning to Lehman's reputation in the art world and most threatened his colleagues' willingness to support him in the future.

But I do not think Lehman should be on trial, or Chris Ofili, or even Guiliani. Central to this discussion is what these events tell us about the desperate financial situation of many American museums and society's unwillingness to adequately fund the making and showing of art. Also at issue is U.S. society's addiction to entertainment. So deluged is the public with images, so overstimulated by the media, that museums now position art as entertainment. Lehman is certainly not the first to capitalize on these obsessions. Without some dramatic hook--motorcycles, blockbuster favorites, old-master must-sees, or artists who make death masks out of their own blood--it is increasingly difficult for museums to bring in the crowds they need to generate the revenue that shows require, just to break even in the U.S. And these practices are not just intended to attract younger audiences.

Also in question is how and by whom artwork is contextualized. Who has the power to give meaning to the work? Once Guiliani targeted the image of the Holy Virgin Mary and misrepresented it as irreverent, as blasphemously splattered with dung, there was no turning back. He seized control of the event, set the terms in the public arena, and constructed the painting's meaning from his own ignorance. All those in the art world who were involved with the show then had to scramble to get the media to recontextualize, redefine, redescribe, and reinscribe it with the meaning the artist had intended. There was an attempt by Guiliani and others to polarize the event: either one expressed reverence for the image of the Virgin and then acted appropriately outraged by the interpretation of Ofili's work as presented by Guiliani, or one was willing to contemplate the artist's intent and risk being labeled an elitist and blasphemer. These manipulations shocked Ofili, who had not had any response like this in London and had no real power to defend or explain himself in this public situation. From the objections articulated about Ofili's image it was only a few steps to questions such as these: Does anyone have the right to imagine

such an image or to show it in a public institution? And, if it is shown, is it any wonder someone felt obliged to deface it? These issues battled themselves out in the public sphere, interpreted on one side by a sensationalising press - the New York Post--and on the other by a newspaper that, in this instance, was remarkably determined to educate its readers about the history of art, religion, transgression, and bodily fluids - the New York Times.

There was surprisingly little discussion in the media about the Ofili image itself: a black Virgin spotted with small cutouts from pornographic magazines and carefully placed, lacquered balls of dung. Perhaps this is a representation of the Virgin as both sacred and profane, capable of manifesting herself as white, black, and brown. Such ideas never emerged in most media coverage. There was little speculation about whether the race of the Madonna provoked Giuliani, perhaps even more than the elephant dung had. Nor was there much discussion about the color of the paint finally thrown at the Holy Virgin Mary to cover her up seemingly, to make her pure, to make her white. Why was the issue of her race avoided in most conversations? Many New Yorkers were not deceived by Giuliani's theatrics. Among the exhibition's attendees polled about the show, eighty-five percent simply wanted to be left alone to formulate their own response to the art, as was witnessed by the show's large attendance. They saw Giuliani's actions for what they were - a political move to control, to polarize, to seduce, to appeal to a certain conservative constituency. And for the most part such strategies left New Yorkers cold.

In New York, the so-called art and culture capital of the world, the art community proved to be a great disappointment, unable to mobilize itself effectively in response. After all the previous incidents of this kind, what had the art world learned? Apparently not much. When it finally did react, it could only present a tired argument advocating freedom of expression; it failed to articulate the right and necessity of a democratic society to support the work of artists whose interpretations of the world allow us to evolve visually and intellectually.

Why did it take so long for the New York museum directors to respond? Was it because they didn't much care? Because it wasn't their museum? Because they too are dependent on New York funds and therefore were afraid of Giuliani and the potential for retaliation? Because they were immobilized by the realiza-

tion that something so banal could occur in New York--a city that prides itself on sophistication, savvy, and an inability to be shocked? Because they are implicated in, and therefore uncomfortable with, the focus on the ambiguous role of donors, patrons, and issues of conflict of interest? Were they, like Philippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, adverse to defending this show and self-righteous in disassociating himself from it or Brooklyn's exhibition practices, as he made so clear in his egregious op-ed piece in the New York Times? Perhaps the museum directors moved so slowly to respond because it was the Brooklyn Museum, somewhere "over there," in a borough only a few New York art museum directors ever choose to visit? At the core of the cynicism surrounding this event is the reality that a general audience does not understand the inner workings of the art world - the world of patronage, the buying and selling of art. Nor does a general audience understand the issue of an artist's intent.

Art, most people believe, is committed to higher values and therefore antithetical to commerce; it is independent and should stand above the capitalist quagmire. But alas, little can. In this instance the veil was ripped away: art came dangerously close to being marketed as entertainment and associating itself with the worst of mercenary attributes - greed. Long articles took delight in exposing the relationship between the show and those who might have reaped financial gains from its success. But exhibitions in other museums are often compromised in similar ways, if not the extent seen at Brooklyn then to some extent - a catalogue paid for by the artists' dealer or by one of his or her collectors, a contribution by the dealer directed to the bottom line of the exhibition, board members who collect works by artists shown in their museum. Or, one could cite Dior, Faberge, and Cartier, all of whom have been financially involved in supporting major exhibitions focused on the history of their designs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, shows that clearly enhanced their name, prestige, and therefore the value of their products. Lots of people are making money on art, but it is usually not the artists. All of this is common practice. The "Sensation" fiasco was perhaps more extreme, more overt, more crass, involving as it did the likes of Saatchi and his collection and even a rock star--David Bowie. And it took place in Brooklyn, already a bit declassé for the elite

of the art world. Would Giuliani have dared to assert himself as he did had it been the Metropolitan Museum of Art, whose board includes very powerful members of his own political party? The Brooklyn Museum was abandoned by its colleagues, left to stand alone and explain itself as if it were unique in engaging in such practices, and perhaps just a bit more hungry for recognition and more desperate to attract visitors.

What can we say about the diverse group of visitors who attended this show in spite of, or even because of, these controversies? What was their frame of reference? A general audience in the United States does not necessarily see the role of art in society in broad terms, nor do they grasp the role of the avant-garde--its mandate to raise complex issues and express divergent points of view. Nor do most people think about why we need and want art to do this for us. Most good artists, and there were several in the "Sensation" show, do not set out to shock. They might attempt to challenge or provoke, but this is out of their own need to reflect upon and give shape to their complex and often contradictory understanding of the world. If they interpret an iconic image in a radically new way, is this not one function art should serve? If they challenge our assumptions about art, why do we not welcome this challenge and the dialogue that surrounds it? What are we so afraid of?

We in the U.S. art world have not done a good job of educating the general public or ourselves, about such issues. The Brooklyn Museum controversy created a cathexis of issues begging to be unraveled: from the relationship of art to society, to the parameters of freedom of expression, to the use of taxpayers' dollars, to how "difference" is addressed in the U.S. Do freedom of expression and protection of property exist only for those whose representations of reality match our own or align with those in power? What is the purpose of art in a democratic society?

There is much to be said about a situation in which a 72-year-old devout Catholic inadvertently becomes a graffiti activist; Heiner vandalized the work of the vandalizer. Such events often result in absurd moments--like the Chicago alderman's attempt to burn David Nelson's infamous portrait of Chicago's late mayor in women's underwear on the front lawn of the School of the Art Institute. The alderman's aggressions led the police to "arrest" the painting, "for its own good." Heated human passions and

the laws we have defined to contain them often bump up against each other in the public arena. When this occurs, public intellectuals need to come forward to discuss how art becomes a magnet for the special cultural, and political issues of its times, and how societies, even democratic ones, expose their fear of the human imagination when they act out a desire to repress and punish it, simply because some feel it has gone too far.

Part II: Sullyng the Temple

“The origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures requires that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very thing that cultures are based on.”

What is at the core of this controversy involving visual images and others that have occurred in the last decade in the U.S.? In each conflict a basic misconception, misunderstanding, and antagonism has been revealed between how a general audience imagines the role of art in U.S. society and how artists, and those connected to various art worlds, imagine the role of art. These perceptions are often divergent and in conflict.

A general audience might say that art should add beauty, joy, elegance, and an element of play to the social structures. Some may even see art as having a particular spiritual role. Those who are religious may still want art to be in the service of the church. And there also are those who understand art as expressing the workings of the unconscious. But very few people would say that art of necessity raises those issues a society needs to confront, and even fewer would express gratitude for artists who problematize issues in their work. Most people would agree that art is essential to society; few could articulate why. But without an ability to explain art's importance to society, how can we successfully defend it when it is under attack, or even convince others of the merit of studying art as an appreciator or practitioner?

Lewis Hyde's brilliant 1998 book, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, presents a fascinating reading of the trickster archetype in various mythologies, including Native American and African societies as well as in contemporary literature, music, and history. Hyde invokes artists and thinkers such as Picasso, Duchamp, Ginsberg, John Cage, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Frederick Douglass as examples of those who turned the

world on its head. An understanding of the trickster archetype and its various historical manifestations provides a useful framework with which we can examine what happened in Brooklyn as well in other situations where controversy has spun around art. It can also help us to explain, even to ourselves, why there are times when society needs art not to be safe and to be, of necessity, unnerving.

Hyde explains that the trickster is the one who mixes up the profane and the sacred, who is unafraid to transgress all borders. Hyde says that although the trickster “appears to debase” the sacred by introducing earthly dirt into his or her practice, “the visual consequence of this dirtying is the god’s eventual renewal.” Tricksters are of this earth themselves - themselves of the fallen world - but playful in this condition nonetheless, smearing dirt on all things to bring them back to the world to remind us that their uniqueness is of the world. But at the same time that the Trickster is earthly, he or she is also connected to the immaterial world - that of unconscious and spiritual association unlimited by time and space, capable of complexity or contradiction. The trickster plays with all these boundaries, treads on the borders, disrupts the prescribed order. This is the work of Hermes or Mercury, the work of what we have come to call the mercurial imagination--a type of creativity that can’t resist sullying what has become oppressively sanctified, pure, and at times hidden and inaccessible. Hyde says the trickster is not immoral but rather amoral-- refusing to operate within the normal conventions, not completely without respect for the sacred but out of a more personal response to archetypes that does not seek to disempower or necessarily bring shame to them but rather to reinvent them. Tricksters do not operate in the temenos-- the sacred precinct of the temple-- but rather in the pro fanum, the space outside the temple. It is here that they use their power to invert and rearrange the order of things simply through their presence.

When we experience the work of the trickster, it is recognizable to us because this figure disenchants the enchanted, reenchants what has been sullied, moves the center farther to the peripheries, forcing a renegotiation of boundaries. He or she refuses that which is flat, linear, easily defined, and instead chooses that which resides in metaphor and ambiguity, like the workings of a dream. In Hyde’s sense, communist societies were so easy

to parody because they were so unidimensional-- flattened of all such mercuriality. They seemed sterile, austere, refusing any recognition of the unconscious. When we say that a work of art reminds us of socialist realism it is rarely a compliment. Rather, it is usually meant to disparage the work for its lack of play or complexity. Totalitarian societies that have tried to dictate what art should be have usually forgotten that the power of the visual resides precisely in its unpredictability and incorrigibility. But this is threatening to those who fear the loss of control. When those in power attempt to legislate art's inventiveness, the trickster inevitably foils their efforts or, if irrevocably thwarted, goes into a deep sleep, leaving the world frozen and diminished.

The antithesis of the bureaucrat, the trickster plays in the realm of the sacred. The key word is plays and, by extension, plays upon. The trickster, Hermes, plays the lyre - the prized instrument Apollo seeks to possess and learn to play; but Hermes also plays the liar who refuses to tell the truth. He lies to show us that even we can be fooled, and he also lies and seduces us to get what he wants. The trickster is always living by his wits, making a way out of "no way": his inventiveness is his creativity and his creativity is that of an artist - ingenious, involving talent and production. Not your average criminal, the trickster is wily and cunning to serve a particular end, a liar with a purpose - an artist/liar determined to give form to the formless that is begging to be manifested. Writers of fiction and poetry, as well as visual artists, are all liars to some extent, fabricating reality to move us to recognize certain truths. "Thus," Hyde says, "might we hope to have great liars at our dinner table rather than trivial pursuers of fact." We understand clearly what he means. The spirit in us wants to play, to be challenged as well as entertained. It seeks what is unpredictable and new, it is drawn to the unimagined and to those who seem free of the shackles of the reality principle, those able to give themselves over to fantasy and pleasure.

What trickster act might Ofili have been up to when he titled his image the Holy Virgin Mary? Might he have been involved in a deliberate attempt to create misunderstandings? I am reminded of what D.H. Lawrence wrote in *Studies in Classic American Literature* about the work of Edgar Allan Poe and other nineteenth-century American writers who play with their readers: "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale." In other words, never trust

what the artist tells us he or she is doing, trust the actual effect and complexity of the work. If we only read Poe's own explanation of his work, we might actually believe that his stories were simply formulaic, about effect - a successful strategy to seduce us to terror and nothing more. We might be unwilling to deduce any psychological meaning or motivation from the work, but we would miss the brilliance of Poe's ability to replicate the workings of the unconscious and its various maladies of obsession and monomania in clinical detail, almost a century before such systems of thought were articulated by Freud.

One has to question the sincerity of an artist like Chris Ofili, who in interviews presented the Holy Virgin Mary as nothing that should offend. For each aspect of the work that was labeled controversial he has offered some form of explanation: The elephant dung he tells us is Nigerian iconography, signifying fecundity, fertility, godliness. To the question of the small cutouts of breasts and vaginas from pornographic magazines, he has made it clear that to him these are just little bits of femaleness to remind us that the Virgin was once mortal, that the other side of grace is gravity; the other side of purity, worldliness; of virginity, whorishness that everything exists in its contrary. For him Mary worship is clearly not without obsession and sexual innuendo. But what of the big-toothed, big-lipped almost parody-like African mouth, we might ask Ofili? In his thinking is this an attempt to imagine the Virgin as black African, not white, to see her as playful, joyful, not in sorrow for her lost son but in love with earthly life? Chris Ofili has presented the painting in a calm, rational light—as a series of careful decisions—but there is no doubt that, at least in Brooklyn, “Sensation” blew up around this painting. For some it was far from benign. We need to try to understand why it was volatile or why it was easy for Giuliani to get others to react to it as such.

There is no doubt that the entire painting is transformed for the viewer once one has read the title. Without that highly charged title one might imagine the figure as a portrait of an individual black woman, perhaps African, sexualized through the cutouts and made almost folkloric through the use of color and elephant dung. There might be something cryptic about such an innocent figure adorned with inserts of genitalia, but it is likely it would not have attracted much adverse attention, certainly not within the context of “Sensation,” which was not a show about

visual innocence. It included dismembered cross-sections of sheep and a decapitated cow's head propagating maggots, as well as perverse distortions of children's sexuality. Clean, shellacked elephant dung with no odor seemed quite tame and inconsequential in such a context. But still one might ask: What does it mean to bring dung into an art museum, a space that has almost gained the sanctity of a temple in this society? No one raised in the Western traditions of art making can be innocent of this knowledge and, although of African descent, Ofili was trained as an artist in London, where he was raised. He knew the implications of sullying the temple and that there might be a price to pay. Once the title is read, one is forced to ask: Is the artist serious? Is he making fun? Is he having fun? Is there intention? If so, what is it? What is he saying about the Virgin? And is it in fact irreverent?

It would seem here that the trickster is at work. Not only is he making the museum dirty by bringing dung into its inner space and, in so doing, expanding the possibilities of what materials are appropriate to art making, but he's also transforming the Holy Virgin into an exuberant, folkloric image. And, probably most controversial of all, he made his own representation of the Virgin, defiant of tradition, and thus created confusion. Is he serious about this portrayal or has he tricked the art world into accepting this work and played us like the image, lighthearted, all the while knowing it would prove provocative to some? To those whose ideas about what representations are appropriate to the Virgin are very precise and come strictly out of tradition, this was completely unacceptable, even blasphemous. They might, and some did, object violently to Ofili's gesture and interpret it as an attempt to bring humiliation to the sacred and an attack on their personal belief systems.

While it is clear that Ofili has the right to make any image he chooses, the museum has the right to exhibit it, and people can decide to visit or not, it is still not clear if anyone has the right to mess with what is sacred to others. This is a far more complex question, one at the heart of other recent art controversies. It brings to mind a work from the 1980s, Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, for which Serrano submerged a plastic crucifix in a large vat of urine and then photographed it in romantic diffused light. If people saw the image without knowing its title, they would not take offense. But once the title is read, the audience assumes

it knows something about the artist's intention and *Piss Christ* becomes, for some, pissing on Christ. Once this idea takes hold no explanation incorporating Serrano's Catholicism—his stated intention to redeem the exploitations of the image of Christ—could save the photograph for some devout Catholics. They were enraged. But one has to wonder: What did Serrano think would happen? What else could happen? Is this not, as in the situation of Ofili's painting, the trickster at work, always compulsively stirring the pot?

In *Trickster Makes This World*, Hyde explores this issue of literally dirtying the sacred—returning the world again to its original fullness “before dirt's exclusion,” in relationship to the U.S. flag.⁶ We know that the elaborate rituals of folding the flag as it is lifted from a flagpole are designed to keep the flag from touching the ground and thereby losing its purity. What upset people most about art student Scott Tyler's 1988 installation at the School of the Art Institute was not the photographic image of the line of coffins returned from the Vietnam War draped with U.S. flags. Rather, the controversy stemmed from the possibility that a flag placed on the gallery floor might be stepped on by viewers while they tried to write in the book provided for their comments and responses to the question posed by the title of the piece—*What is the Proper Way to Display the U.S. Flag?*⁷ In response, the gallery director at the school took the flag home each night to wash it in Woolite, in hopes of dispelling any sense that the school had intended to harm the flag or that a dirty flag would be on display. When the same piece was shown in Anchorage, Alaska, the local veterans' group picked the flag up off the gallery floor daily, leaving a check for \$32.50 to cover the cost of replacing it, thus ensuring that for the run of the show a new flag would appear every day. This was truly the art object become performance event. The veterans' response in Alaska, although bizarre to many, seemed quite civilized compared with the mayhem that ensued in Chicago, where chaos threatened the physical safety of school and museum personnel as well as students, not to mention the museum's collection—all in the name of keeping the flag off the floor, to keep the sacred from mixing with the profane. When artists mess with what is sacred to others, there is always the risk that their work will trigger such results. But such incidents, whether anticipated before their occurrence, or not, are rarely the concern of

tricksters. They are simply doing their job, often to the exasperation of those left to manage the often unmanageable results.

For Hyde, tricksters are also those who “seek to change the face of shame,” who refuse to accept the rules about what is shameful. Hence they are constantly attempting to commit what is deemed the shameful act to reduce its power, to make light of it, to raise the bar of acceptance. They are seismic dislocators, shifting the ground under our feet so we never stand in the same place for too long. In a puritanical society like that of the U.S., already ambivalent about graven images, those who in any way compromise the reverent portrayal of images taken to be sacred are not greeted with appreciation for helping to renew the image and raise important questions about the sources of shame or for “lifting the shame covers”;⁸ rather, they are scorned and ostracized. But trouble is not what these artists fear. Being ignored would probably seem a worse fate to them. Remember Hermes, the trickster, is the god of “stealthy appropriation”—a thief by choice, and proud of it.

With the Holy Virgin Mary, Ofili was doubtless intending to be provocative. As a black artist in a predominantly white art world, he is aware that there is an expectation that his work will in some way reference blackness. He plays with this and takes it to an even farther point, back to the elephants of Africa, a place so primal and unexpected that either people accept the work as African and exotic, or they question why he insists on using dung everywhere, even to portray the Virgin Mary.

This type of provocation is difficult for those outside the art world to accept as a legitimate motivation for art making. Because there has been an absence of a visible avant-garde tradition in the U.S., one in which artists assume their right to expand the boundaries of both form and content and audiences assume their right to respond to such work—all in the name of civilization’s evolution—a general audience is simply not used to accepting such acts of transgression as positive. This was certainly true of *Piss Christ*. It never occurred to those upset by the idea of the photograph, since so few even saw it, that Serrano was himself a Catholic. Or, if they did understand the way in which the artist was playing with these multiple meanings, they resented the sense of entitlement that allowed him to reinterpret an image that has been given meaning by millions of worshippers over centuries.

There is no doubt that the role of the artist is socially and historically constructed, as are the images they are able, willing, and determined to create. And the function these images serve has to be understood within its cultural context. Anthropologists, for example, talk about two different kinds of societies in their approach to dealing with troublemakers like the trickster. There are those societies which ingest or cannabilize what is other and potentially threatening. And there are those anthropoemic societies which vomit, eject, or isolate those who engage in troublemaking, put them in jail, relegate them to the wilderness, the margins, or, fearful of the power of their otherness, destroy them. Obviously, says Hyde, it is to the advantage of any change agent to stay on the thresholds and points of entry, lest they find themselves excluded or, worse, obliterated.

Part III: What is to be learned?

“If dirt is a by-product of the creation of order, then a fight about dirt is always a fight about how we have shaped our world.”

Much of the media discussion around what happened at the Brooklyn Museum focused on the perception that the temple, or the “sacred precinct,” as the American Association of Museum Directors referred to their institutions—had been sullied. Under what conditions was the work shown? Many believed that the art museum, by taking “dirty” money from Saatchi—the advertising executive, as he is often described—and enhancing the value of his collection, had put its reputation in jeopardy, and, by association, that of all art museums. Some also expressed great anger that the museum had played into the public’s insatiable appetite for entertainment by mixing high and low, by opening the gate; by installing sensational art at best, and bad art at worst, into the temple and, in so doing, legitimizing this work as having aesthetic and moral value. For them the whole incident had little to do with the place of art in society and everything to do with museum policy and practice, and with a betrayal of the public trust in these institutions to only select the best art for the purest reasons, to uphold certain values. Months after the “Sensation” vandalism incident had occurred, the American Association of Museum Directors held a meeting and put into effect a new set of guidelines on determining what gets shown in American museums and who pays

for it. But even more important than the lessons about propriety learned from this confrontation are those concerning contemporary art, its function in the larger culture, and how the acceptance of controversial work can change the perception of what is acceptable.

In the last three hundred years, as artists grew more independent from the church in constructing their images, the power of artists to influence how the sacred was constructed diminished. Their work became less and less directly important to most people's spiritual lives or in the shaping of a collective iconography. Some of the work also became increasingly challenging, and even provocative, to those people not expert in the field; it developed, in effect, into its own religion with its own language, points of reference, and rituals. This has created a longstanding division between avant-garde artists and the general public. On the one hand, when a work seems provocative, there are few forums though which conversation about its meaning can be convened. On the other hand, viewers can feel disempowered because if an image disturbs them, they appear to have no real recourse to move it out of public view. They may not even feel intellectually able to defend their at times unpopular objections, which they may also fear will seem provincial to art world sophisticates. They may believe they have no means of self-expression with which to respond to the work comparable to that available to artists. This sense of disempowerment can lead to anger, which for some results in aggression against the object. For their part, artists immediately rush to hide behind their right to freedom of expression, instead of trying to understand the response their work is eliciting. Perhaps this seeming impasse could be breached if a broad consensus could be reached on the myriad roles art can serve in a healthy society. Such a society may be defined as one that is not afraid of its own contradictions or those darker aspects of the self to be found in the pro-fanum.

As a writer and educator, I have never believed that my job has been to determine what art should be and do. What artists do is art; whether it is successful in communicating its intent effectively is another question. Art is often prophetic by speaking to us through the imagination. It is then up to us to determine whether it is true or false prophecy. In educating young artists at the School of the Art Institute, the faculty tries not to tell young

artists what they should do or what art should be or should not be. In truth we cannot predict what art will look like in the future. While faculty may tell them what art has been, it is the next generation that will tell us what it will be. If professors disagree with the validity of the student's intention—if they see the art as badly conceived; as problematically racist, sexist, controversial for controversy's sake; or badly executed—they then work with the student, push him or her intellectually and artistically until the work gets stronger or the concept for the work becomes clearer. Instructors also need to help students talk about and contextualize their own work, before others do it for them, such as writers and critics, who will have an open playing field for interpretation if artists are not clear about their intent. Critics, and not the artists, will then frame the conversation around the work, and artists will have no obvious tools of clarification. To educate in this way is to accept the idea that art, by its very nature, is always in transition, constantly evolving in form and content but also in its societal role.

As we approach the next generation of artists, thinkers, businesspeople, educators, intellectuals, and citizens, how do we want to present art to them? These are questions that must constantly be thought about and then rethought. To answer these types of questions adequately, one must look beyond art history to, philosophy, literature, anthropology, history and theoretical writing across all these disciplines. We need to see art as it is—a sociological phenomenon, representative of human evolution and expression—a representation of society as it moves through the individual, a representation of individuals as they move through society, a link with our own collective unconscious and with our spiritual development as a species and our progress in developing a utopian sense of our own potential humanity. It is through such a process that one comes to understand how art functions in the society and how important it is to society's well-being. In this broader context, even art controversies are useful. If they are mined properly, they can tell us about the health of a society at a given moment—how tolerant, flexible, generous, and fearless it is; how in touch it really is with its own complexity and multiple publics.

Although controversial work is often rejected at first, as these incidents of art in the public realm demonstrate, they none-

theless change the perception of what art is and what it can be. Such incidents literally move art from the back section of “Arts and Leisure” to the front page and make it news. In so doing they broaden the scope of what a general audience comes to understand as art. The number of visitors to the Brooklyn “Sensation” show became outrageously large only after the controversy had been framed by Giuliani. Before that, the show was destined to remain cloistered within the small domain of the art world. Instead, seemingly half of Brooklyn’s populace showed up to find out what all the fuss was about and, in the process, expanded their understanding of contemporary art and in most cases their tolerance for it. This show also prepared people for the next controversial work that might be transformed by public response from art into an event. Perhaps the next time art is about something provocative and difficult, it will be easier for those who saw this show to welcome it and ingest it with tolerance and even enthusiasm.

To want to hold back the new, to believe only in the tried and true and established is to mistrust the future and the creative forces that give rise to it. To fear the trickster or to try to suppress such a figure of change in society is only to encourage others to assume that role with a vengeance. Someone needs to be turning the world upside down, constantly, so that we don’t die of boredom, weighed down by all the oppressive rules we construct to hold ourselves and each other back—mistrustful as we are of our own tendencies to spurts of creative lawlessness. Some force has to fight conformity, move the margins to the center, encourage us to play. Usually this is the role designated to artists who often refuse to divide anything into dirty and clean, acceptable and unacceptable, black and white. We must applaud them for their inability to adhere to the letter of the law and for the ingeniousness with which they inevitably break it and demand its rethinking, freeing all of us to reimagine our world. And so we need to extend our gratitude to talented tricksters like Chris Ofili and other equally playful, daring, and confrontational artists for, in Hyde’s words, “keeping the joints of creation limber.”