The elephant in the gallery, or the lessons of “Sensation”

by Roger Kimball

On “Sensation: Young British Artists From the Saatchi Collection,” the Brooklyn Museum of Art

Today everybody innovates. Deliberately, methodically. And the innovations are deliberately and methodically made startling. Only it now turns out not to be true that all startling art is necessarily innovative or new art. . . . It has become apparent that art can have a startling impact without really being or saying anything startling—or new. The character itself of being startling, spectacular, or upsetting has become conventionalized, part of safe good taste.

—Clement Greenberg (1969)

I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge, and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.

—Marcel Duchamp (1946)

William Blake discerned a world in a grain of sand. Thanks to Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and an exhibition called “Sensation: Young British Artists From the Saatchi Collection” at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, we see ourselves in a clump of elephant dung. Should we like what we see?

It was really the mayor, of course, who made “Sensation” the sensation of the season. As all the world knows by now, shortly before the exhibition was due to open, Mr. Giuliani denounced it as “outrageous” and full of “sick stuff.” Exhibit “A” was a blasphemous depiction of the Virgin Mary festooned with cutouts from pornographic magazines and—the pièce de résistance—a clump or two of elephant dung. The mayor might have mentioned other items. The pubescent female mannequins, for example, studded with erect penises, vaginas, and anuses, fused together in various postures of sexual coupling, or the portrait of a child molester and murderer made from what looks like a child’s hand prints, or the bisected animals (pigs, cows) in plexiglass tanks full of formaldehyde.

“Sick stuff” indeed. Although acknowledging that, if paid for privately, such an exhibition would be protected by the First Amendment, Mr. Giuliani insisted that it did not deserve public support.
“You don’t have a right to government subsidy for desecrating somebody else’s religion,” he said. “[I]f you are a government-subsidized enterprise, then you can’t do things that desecrate the most personal and deeply held views of people in society.” If the exhibition opened, he warned, he would do everything he could to cut off city funds for the museum—about $7 million, a third of the institution’s budget.

Good luck. The exhibition opened as planned and seems to be drawing record crowds at $9.75 a pop for tickets. Charles Saatchi, the British ad-man and art speculator, must be beside himself with glee; it is not every private collector that can get a major public art museum to preview his collection for him in the U.S.—or get the auction house Christie’s to help pay for the exhibition. And all this publicity! How the market values of his artists must be soaring. Yes, the city cancelled its monthly payments to the museum and is seeking to have its lease revoked. But the museum has engaged Floyd Abrams, the famous First Amendment lawyer, to sue the city for infringing on its First Amendment rights. The American Civil Liberties Union has lumbered into action on behalf of the museum. (Though imagine the ACLU’s response if the museum had tried to exhibit an image of the Virgin “straight,” e.g., in a crèche at Christmas!) All across the country the so-called “arts community” and its supporters have stampeded like the proverbial herd of independent minds, condemning the mayor for attempting to “censor” the artists and stifle the progress of “challenging” art. The liberal establishment has contracted, as Hamlet might have put it, into one furious brow of woe. Nazi Germany has been invoked. So has Stalinist Russia and Joseph McCarthy.

Consider the performance of The New York Times. The last time I checked, our paper of record had published more than fifty articles about “Sensation.” There have been blistering editorials lambasting the mayor for censorship and “hysteria,” news stories detailing public support for the Brooklyn Museum, a fawning profile of the artist who made the Madonna decorated with porn and elephant dung, an exposé chiding those few arts institutions—like Carnegie Hall and the Museum of the City of New York—that declined to sign a petition in support of the Brooklyn Museum (what about their right to free speech and a dissenting opinion?). There has also been a steady flow of critical pieces regurgitating the standard liberal line showing—or purporting to show—how “innovative” artists through the ages have been misunderstood, pilloried, or neglected, only to emerge later (often too late!) as acknowledged geniuses. One particularly obtuse piece, by the Times’s chief art critic Michael Kimmelman, even compared the controversy over “Sensation” to the difficulties Paolo Veronese had with church authorities in 1573 over his painting “Feast in the House of Levi” (how do you spell “anachronism”?). And so on. According to The Idler, an Internet magazine, the Times has already published more front-page stories about “Sensation” than it published about the extermination of the Jews in World War II.

What mighty contests rise from trivial things”? In part. But there are signs that the controversy over “Sensation” may mark the beginning of a new chapter not only in the debate over public funding of so-called “challenging” art, but also in our understanding of the relation between the public sphere and the limits of acceptable speech. Whatever the courts decide, we will be able to look back on the controversy over “Sensation” as a casebook of lessons
about cultural life at the end of the twentieth century. The lessons, although hardly unambiguous, can tell us something about the value we place on art today, about the relation between art and freedom of speech, and about the competing claims that manners and morals have on our allegiance.

Let’s start with the word “art.” In any traditional sense of the word, the objects in “Sensation” can barely be said to exist. As Philippe de Montebello, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, pointed out in one of the few dissenting op-ed pieces the Times has deigned to publish about the controversy, to see “Sensation” is to recognize that “the emperor has no clothes.” Considered as art, the objects on view are pathetic or worse.

But of course aesthetic quality is not really the issue. Mr. de Montebello plaintively noted that artistic quality, not politics, ought to be the “crucial issue” when it comes to exhibitions of art. He is right. But the fact is that considerations of artistic quality are completely irrelevant to events like “Sensation.” This is in large part a legacy of our culture’s mindless love affair with the avant-garde. One of the many canards that has been called upon to work overtime during this controversy centers on the idea that important new art always or at least generally shocks, and therefore is rejected by, established taste. Sometimes the idea is formulated in an even more extreme form: that important new art sets out to shock established taste: that being “shocking” (“provocative,” “transgressive”—what used to be called obscene or blasphemous) is the very raison d’être of art.

Glenn D. Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art, gave typical expression to this cliché in his op-ed piece for The New York Times (doubtless written in response to Mr. de Montebello). Assuring his readers that the work of many of the artists represented in “Sensation” is “serious, thoughtful, and daring,” Mr. Lowry castigated our society’s philistine “resistance to the new.” We need, Mr. Lowry wrote, “constantly to remind ourselves that artists reviled or forgotten in one era become revered in another. Innovation in the arts occurs by pushing the boundaries of aesthetic and social norms, by reconfiguring what we see and know.”

“Reconfiguring” is a nice word. What do you suppose Mr. Lowry means by it here? While you ponder that, note that his contention does not itself reconfigure anything. It merely transcribes the conventional wisdom, according to which artists are engaged not only in aesthetic or artistic innovation, but also in social, i.e. moral, innovation. Mr. Lowry makes it clear that he thinks both sorts of innovation are highly laudable. He also thinks they require a special effort on our part. “To work with contemporary art,” he says, “is to understand that new ideas require a great deal of patience and openness.”

Just about everything that could be wrong with Mr. Lowry’s observations is wrong. In the first place, it is by no means the case that art of the past typically challenged established taste, much less that it set out deliberately to do so. On the contrary, throughout most of history, art has reflected and reinforced established taste. The image of the artist as an outsider, “transgressing” conventional aesthetic or societal norms, is a dubious hold-over from nineteenth-century
Romanticism. Secondly, if it is sometimes true that “artists reviled or forgotten in one era become revered in another,” the opposite is also true: that some, indeed many, artists revered in one era are promptly reviled and forgotten in the next. Thirdly, Mr. Lowry harps on our society’s “fear of the new.” But in fact our society has made a positive fetish of novelty, not least in the arts. Far from suffering from a “resistance to the new,” we are addicted to it: we can hardly see anything else.

It is ironical, then, that “the new” has long since lost its novelty value. The search for the new has been a staple of artistic practice for over a century. Without exception, the objects in “Sensation” are banal, repulsive, or both. None is aesthetically new. Anyone familiar with the history of Dada and Surrealism has seen it all before: the pornography, the pathological fascination with decay and mutilation, the toying with blasphemy (dressed up, occasionally, as a new religiosity).

I “made up” the putrefaction of the donkeys with great pots of sticky glue which I poured over them. Also I emptied their eye-sockets and made them larger by hacking them out with scissors. In the same way I furiously cut their mouths open to make the rows of teeth show to better advantage, and I added several jaws to each mouth, so that it would appear that although the donkeys were already rotting they were vomiting up a little more of their own death.

That is Salvador Dalí in 1942, recounting his work for the Surrealist film Un Chien Andalou. Damien Hirst has nothing on Dalí.

Well, perhaps Mr. Hirst and his peers do have one advantage—a commercial, not an aesthetic, advantage—over Dalí. When Dalí was active, there were still the remnants of resistance to his pathological antics among people concerned with high culture. Such resistance is now vanishing. Which brings me to the elephant in the gallery. Presupposed by Mr. Lowry’s remarks—and in this he merely echoes received liberal opinion—is the notion that exhibitions like “Sensation” “challenge” established taste. But the truth is, of course, that they are established taste. Exhibitions like “Sensation” are a dime-a-dozen these days. They fill the special exhibition galleries of virtually every art museum the world over. How could anything so obvious have been overlooked?

In the weeks before “Sensation” opened and the mayor intervened, the Brooklyn Museum did everything it could to play up the show’s outrageous nature. It proudly announced that “T-shirts, including one packaged with a condom, with a choice of ‘Safe’ or ‘Unsafe’ emblazoned on it” would be for sale in the gift shop. It even sent around a mock “Health Warning” cautioning potential viewers that “the contents of this exhibition may cause shock, vomiting, confusion, panic,” and so forth. Subsequently, the museum purchased the cover art for an issue of The Village Voice depicting Mayor Giuliani as the Devil posed leeringly behind a picture of the Madonna. Like other arts institutions these days, the Brooklyn Museum wants the publicity attached to outraging public taste but not the outrage. It wants to “transgress” boundaries, but only if the result is applause and increased attendance, not censure. Most of the time, of course, such institutions get what they want: freedom without obligation, dispensation to act like a spoiled adolescent without
penalty.

Once upon a time, as everyone knows, the avant-garde really did “challenge” bourgeois taste. But that challenge effectively came to an end with Abstract Expressionism. That was the last time established cultural opinion mounted any serious resistance to a new art form. Established taste ridiculed Abstract Expressionism and then within a few years found it embraced as great art. How mortifying! The safest way to prevent such an embarrassment from happening again was simply to embrace everything. Make “the new” one’s gravamen of taste. Lobotomize one’s aesthetic and moral faculties in order to remain trendy.

Since then, it has been capitulation all the way. Bourgeois taste has scrambled to keep up with avant-garde, or so-called avant-garde, practice. (“So-called” because what is referred to as “cutting-edge” art these days is not avant anything; it is just business as usual.) This is why mainstream establishment institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and the Brooklyn Museum can mount exhibitions of the latest art-world freak and be sure of attracting the cream of New York society to the black-tie dinner celebrating the opening. It used to be that the Salon looked to the past and resisted aesthetic innovation. The Salon of today insists on the appearance of innovation and forgets the past. We laugh at the hapless critics who abused Cézanne and ignored van Gogh. It won’t be long before we are laughing—some of us have already begun—at the critics who celebrate garbage in the solemn tones of aesthetic delectation. Consider Michael Kimmelman’s delicious pronouncement in The New York Times Magazine recently that Matthew Barney is “the most important American artist of his generation.” Barney’s oeuvre consists of things like “Field Dressing (Orifill),” a video, Mr. Kimmelman explains, that shows the artist “naked climbing up a pole and cables and applying dollops of Vaseline to his orifices.” Like the artists in “Sensation,” Matthew Barney is “important” only because he tests the limits of parody. He is part of what I have elsewhere called the trivialization of outrage. It is too bad that Evelyn Waugh isn’t around to do justice to the comedy.

It has been a long time since you could count on the word “art” having much substantive content. These days, “art” is a deeply equivocal term. It retains its old meaning—“the production of the beautiful in a graphic or plastic medium”—but it has also acquired a new, purely honorific meaning. After Marcel Duchamp finished exhibiting an ordinary bottle rack and a urinal, a logical limit had been glimpsed. The effect of Duchamp’s pranks was to point out that anything could be art. All it took was getting people to agree to call something art. A crushed Buick? No problem. A dead horse? Yes, of course. The artist’s feces? By all means: a safe bet for the Turner Prize.

You might think that the proliferation of bogus art would lead to a sharp devaluation of art. But this has not happened, at least so far as the public’s appetite is concerned. (The question of a general lowering of aesthetic quality is another matter.) Indeed, getting something recognized as art is like acquiring a union card: you instantly receive all sorts of fringe benefits—potential financial benefits, of course, but also what might be called moral or metaphysical benefits. A juror in
an obscenity trial stemming from the exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe’s notorious photographs of the sado-masochistic homosexual underground dramatized this point. Acknowledging that he did not like Mapplethorpe’s rebarbative photographs, the juror nonetheless concluded that “if people say it’s art, then I have to go along with it.” An amazing statement, that.

Of course, this intimidation-by-art is not entirely new. Reviewing Salvador Dalí’s autobiography in the mid-1940s, George Orwell observed that in many quarters there existed an unspoken assumption that

the artist is to be exempt from the moral laws that are binding on ordinary people. Just pronounce the magic word “Art,” and everything is O.K. Rotting corpses with snails crawling over them are O.K.; kicking little girls in the head is O.K.; even a film like L’Age d’Or [which shows among other things detailed shots of a woman defecating] is O.K.

Orwell slightly overstated the case. Not quite everything is OK. The outrage must be a certifiable politically correct outrage. Thus when the art dealer Mary Boone recently passed out live ammunition at a gallery opening she was duly charged with unlawful distribution of ammunition and resisting arrest. Guns are naughty. The Brooklyn Museum can exhibit a picture of the Virgin covered with porn and clumps of elephant dung—trashing Roman Catholicism is definitely an OK pursuit—and it’s an artist exercising his right to free speech. But just try the same thing with the Star of David or an image sacred to Islam or a portrait of Martin Luther King. Still, by and large Orwell’s point holds: “If you threw dead donkeys at people, they threw money back.” The disturbing thing, as Mr. de Montebello observed in his op-ed piece, is that so many people are “so cowed by the art establishment or so frightened at being labeled philistines that they dare not speak out and express their dislike for works that they find either repulsive or unaesthetic or both.”

It is worth noting that Mr. de Montebello, though praising Mayor Giuliani’s “astute critical acumen,” did criticize his efforts to withhold funds from the Brooklyn Museum. For myself, I cannot help regarding the mayor’s action as a courageous, heartfelt gesture—perhaps the only really “transgressive” gesture in the entire controversy. All the same, the legal squabble it precipitated is unfortunate. More, it betokens an important public failure. For it brings the law to bear on a realm of activity that, in a healthy society, should be adjudicated in the court of taste and manners. To my mind, the controversy over “Sensation” has much less to do with free speech than with some basic questions about the kind of public life we want to encourage. Every freedom—even freedom of speech—carries a corresponding duty. Moral and aesthetic objections cannot always be answered simply by appealing to the First Amendment. In the 1920s, John Fletcher Moulton, a British judge, observed that “there is a widespread tendency to regard the fact that [one] can do a thing as meaning [one] may do it. There can be no more fatal error than this. Between ‘can do’ and ‘may do’ ought to exist the whole realm which recognizes the sway of duty, fairness, sympathy, taste, and all the other things that make life beautiful and society possible.”

One of the most destructive aspects of our culture has been the evisceration of that middle ground of “duty, fairness, sympathy, taste,” etc.—everything that Lord Moulton congregated under the
memorable category of “obedience to the unenforceable.” The controversy over “Sensation” has dramatized this admirably. It would be a pity if its lessons were obscured by another orgy of self-righteous and misdirected rhetoric about the First Amendment.

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest book is *The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia* (St. Augustine’s Press).

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