

CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE

IN GOOD CONSCIENCE

December 15th, 2010

G. Wayne Clough, Secretary
Smithsonian Institution
Smithsonian Institution Building, Room 205
1000 Jefferson Drive, SW
Washington, DC 20013-7012

Dear Secretary Clough,

We at Catholics for Choice are very disappointed in your decision to remove David Wojnarowicz's "A Fire in My Belly" from the "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture" exhibition. Your decision amounted to censorship, plain and simple.

The National Portrait Gallery plays a vital role in safeguarding and expanding the nation's cultural heritage. In doing so, people have rightly come to expect great things from the gallery. The magnificent spaces that were developed during the recent renovations have fittingly drawn accolades and visitors from around the world. As a result, the gallery's exhibitions nurture the nation's cultural life, promoting the arts as well as the public's appreciation of the arts.

Unfortunately, your decision to censor David Wojnarowicz's art has sullied the reputation of the National Portrait Gallery and does a disservice both to the arts community and the public. For artists, it suggests that in order to be considered by your gallery, their art may have to be uncontroversial. For the public, it suggests that what they see at the gallery may not be the full story, that exhibitions may be tailored so that they do not offend anybody. Neither scenario is positive.

Dealing with complaints and criticism is part and parcel of being a public figure and a public institution. However, that does not mean that you should seek to avoid controversy. Nor, on the other hand, are you required to seek it out without good reason. However, we should acknowledge the role that controversy can play in advancing the arts. Discussions about what is and is not controversial can help us judge what is and is not good art. In considering how to respond to the controversy, you had a decision to make. Who should be the arbiters of what is available -- those who scream the loudest about what they don't like, or those whose job it is to decide whether a specific piece of art is included in an exhibition? In choosing to pay heed to the loudest voices, you did a disservice to the public.

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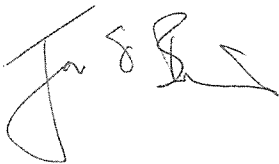
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It is especially disturbing that you bowed to pressure from an organization that has made a business out of manufacturing controversy. Bill Donohue of the Catholic League is a zealot who seeks to curtail freedom of expression at every turn. His attacks on "A Fire in My Belly" follow his tried and tested modus operandi, as can be seen in a report we produced on his group (a copy is enclosed) and would have been obvious to anybody who had done even a cursory search on the group.

The Catholic League does not speak for all Catholics -- in fact it speaks for very few, but does so very loudly. However, as is often the case, the noise level should not be considered indicative of the strength of its support nor the correctness of its claims. We too are Catholics, but we do not support the use of our religion in this crusade. As Catholics, we absolutely do not support your decision and join the majority of Americans -- Catholic and non-Catholic alike -- who do not support censorship of the arts. We can only judge what we can see. We accept the possibility that we may be offended by what we see. In the spirit of promoting artistic freedom, we are happy to accept that possibility.

Censorship of the arts is the last thing that an art institution should be doing. You have set a low standard for yourselves, and for your public. The National Portrait Gallery plays an important role in the cultural life of the city and the nation. Your decision sends the worst possible message to artists, to other cultural institutions and to the American people.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jon O'Brien". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "O".

Jon O'Brien
President, Catholics for Choice