

The Hide/Seek Controversy: Federal Arts Funding and Censorship

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Abstract: This case outlines the events surrounding the National Portrait Gallery’s presentation of the exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*. This exhibition sparked debate due to its focus on gay and lesbian artists and themes, as well as the inclusion of *A Fire in My Belly*, a video work by David Wojnarowicz containing controversial religious imagery. The case charts the trajectory of the controversy, from the initial complaints made by conservative leaders and the video’s eventual removal, to the ensuing protests and threats to Smithsonian funding. The Smithsonian and Republican responses to the exhibition and controversy provide a basis for a larger discussion of federal arts funding and issues of censorship particularly pertaining to hegemonic understandings of culture and sexuality.

Introduction

On October 25, 2010, the Smithsonian Institution issued a press release announcing a new exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery entitled “Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture.” Set to run from October 30, 2010 until February 13, 2011, Smithsonian co-curator Jonathan Katz described it as “the first major museum exhibition to chart the influence of gay and lesbian artists on modern American portraiture” (Katz 2010, 17). The National Portrait Gallery is a traditionally conservative member of the Smithsonian Institution best known for its exhibitions featuring portraits of American historical figures and performers. Thus, the museum’s decision to host an exhibition focused on gay and lesbian artists was viewed as a progressive move and a possible end to the exclusion of gay artists in federally funded institutions which began during the so-called “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s (Hirsch 2011, 77; Katz 2010).

About a month into the show’s run, conservative news media began reporting on several of the 105 works featured in the exhibition, with a focus on the homoerotic nature of the images. David Wojnarowicz’s video montage, *A Fire In My Belly*, received the most attention, specifically for an eleven-second clip of ants crawling across a plastic crucifix (Starr 2010a). Conservative political leaders, along with the Catholic League, deemed the work anti-Christian, with many commentators calling for its removal from the exhibition. In response to these complaints, the Secretary of the Smithsonian, G. Wayne Clough, quickly decided to remove the video, leading to sharp criticism and protest from many who viewed his decision as censorship (Stolberg and Taylor 2011). Even after Clough removed the video, Republican leaders threatened to cut Smithsonian funding if the exhibition was not closed completely. Meanwhile, private art foundations that had helped fund *Hide/Seek* announced they would not fund any future projects if further censorship took place. The attacks from both sides meant Secretary Clough and other

Smithsonian leaders would have to make a decision about the future of *Hide/Seek* within the context of these threats to funding.

The Culture Wars

The controversy surrounding “Hide/Seek” led many reporters and art leaders to draw parallels between the exhibition and the so-called “culture wars” that began in 1989, which challenged the existence of federal arts funding and the idea of artistic freedom (Dobrzynski 2011, 17; Stolberg and Taylor 2011). The event that sparked these wars was the National Endowment for the Arts’ (NEA) \$45,000 grant given to two photography exhibitions displaying works by Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe that featured religious and homoerotic images (Lewis and Brooks 2005, 8). Conservatives opposed this federal support of gay artists and believed that the NEA was funding “blasphemy and indecency” due to the exhibitions’ mixture of religious and sexual imagery. Conversely, cultural liberals saw the critiques of the NEA as “censoring free expression” (Lewis and Brooks 2005, 8). It is this fundamental philosophical divide that sparked the culture wars and continues to drive many contemporary art controversies. Art experts often decide which exhibitions will receive federal funding, which may lead to conflict as they often have more liberal definitions of artistic freedom than those outside the art sphere (Lewis and Brooks 2005, 8). If these art leaders do not anticipate the full range of viewer interpretations when organizing exhibitions, it is possible that they may select works that certain groups find offensive (Thompson 2013, 111). This fact highlights the difficulty in organizing exhibitions, as curators must balance artistic freedom with possible negative reactions from the audience.

The many court cases and controversies associated with the culture wars demonstrate how different ideas of what constitutes an appropriate use of federal funds can lead to the politicization of the arts. In 1989, Christian conservatives represented a political force dedicated to defending “traditional family values” and opposing women and gay liberation movements (Lewis and Brooks 2005, 10). Senator Jesse Helms became the face of the attacks on federal arts funding when he linked the NEA to these movements (Lewis and Brooks 2005, 10). His attempts to promote his moral agenda through a condemnation of the arts illustrate how art scandals provide an opportunity for politicians to cultivate a public persona and present their views on social issues (Karlsson and Wrange 2013, 99). The culture war debates led some to question whether the government should eliminate the NEA altogether, believing it could only be effective if it did not fund politically charged or potentially offensive art (Epstein 2002, 251). The most famous event of the culture wars – and one that closely resembles the National Portrait Gallery controversy – was the Corcoran Gallery’s decision to cancel a planned Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective rather than risk funding cuts, a move that caused substantial backlash within the arts community (Carr 2012, 428-29). As media attention on *Hide/Seek* increased in the fall of 2010, the future of the exhibition quickly became intertwined with a revived debate over what control the government should have over the content of federally funded art exhibitions. Smithsonian leaders were confronted with the decision of whether to capitulate to conservative pressure and close the exhibition or assert their institution’s right to creative freedom.

Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture

Jonathan Katz created *Hide/Seek* to illustrate the development of 20th century American portraiture and how questions of gender and sexuality dramatically shaped that development (Katz and Ward 2010). Katz, the Director of a doctoral program in visual studies at the State

University of New York at Buffalo, unsuccessfully pitched the idea for the exhibition to forty museums before his future co-curator David C. Ward expressed interest in showing it at the National Portrait Gallery (Newsdesk 2010a; Stolberg and Taylor 2011). Ward, a National Portrait Gallery Historian and eventual *Hide/Seek* co-curator, later admitted he was concerned the content might cause controversy, but that he also believed it would be a landmark exhibition in documenting the influence of gay and lesbian artists (Stolberg and Taylor 2011). The Director of the National Portrait Gallery, Martin Sullivan, also approved of the exhibition, writing “this exhibition reveals another layer of American social history, one that greatly influenced these artists’ work and American art as a whole” (Newsdesk 2010a).

Smithsonian Undersecretary Richard Kurin led the meeting during which the National Portrait Gallery officially approved *Hide/Seek*. After the resignation of Kurin, who had been using Smithsonian funds to pay for private jets and other luxuries, G. Wayne Clough became Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in 2008. When Clough took over the position, the Smithsonian’s reputation and budget were in desperate need of repair due to the previous secretary’s “lavish spending” (Stolberg and Taylor 2011). Many hoped Clough’s background running large academic institutions would help him unify the institution’s museums, directors, and administration (Cembalest 2011a; Stolberg and Taylor 2011).

Clough earned his doctorate in Civil Engineering and served on the faculty of Duke, Stanford, and Virginia Tech before he became the president of the Georgia Institute of Technology (Newsdesk 2014). During his time as Georgia Tech’s president, Clough proved to be an effective fund-raiser and innovative leader who could anticipate and contain conflicts. Clough encountered a major conflict at Georgia Tech—similar to the *Hide/Seek* controversy—when some Republican students claimed the university’s speech code prevented them from vocalizing their opposition to gay rights. Although Clough attempted to contain the conflict, the students sued, forcing the university to alter its speech code. Before becoming Secretary of the Smithsonian, however, Clough did not have any experience working within a museum or in the art sphere. Once at the Smithsonian, Clough’s “relaxed style” allowed him to begin solidifying the institution’s administration, but his lack of experience with the art world and past encounters with conflicts surrounding free speech would soon become clear once the *Hide/Seek* controversy began (Dobrzynski 2011, 19; Stolberg and Taylor 2011).

The Catholic League and Republican Response

On November 29th, 2010, CNSNews published an article, entitled “Smithsonian Christmas-Season Exhibit Features Ant-Covered Jesus, Naked Brothers Kissing, Genitalia, and Ellen DeGeneres Grabbing Her Breasts,” that highlighted *A Fire In My Belly*. Soon after its publication, the Catholic League and conservative leaders in the Republican party began labeling the video as anti-Christian (Starr 2010a). Although the Catholic League is an organization dedicated to publicizing any “slanderous assaults” made against the Catholic Church and highlighting any publications, art, or other works that the organization views as anti-Catholic, it is not officially affiliated with the Catholic Church (Catholic League 2014). As part of the organization’s efforts to broadcast anti-Catholic works to the wider public, Catholic League president Bill Donahue referred to Wojnarowicz’s video as hate speech and a direct attack on Catholicism (Starnes 2010). Republican Congressman John Boehner, who would soon become Speaker of the House and then-House Minority Whip Eric Cantor also spoke out against the work. The conservative news service CNSNews, along with Donahue, cited the timing of the exhibition during the Christmas season as proof that exhibition organizers meant the exhibition

to be an assault on Christians (Donahue 2011; Starr 2010a). Donahue argued that his claims had nothing to do with homophobia, and that he did not know “gays were associated with this venture when I complained,” despite several articles and interviews criticizing the exhibition that referred to *Hide/Seek* as a “gay exhibit” and included works beyond the Wojnarowicz video that dealt with homosexuality (Donahue 2011; Starnes 2010; Starr 2010d). Representative Eric Cantor summarized the main complaints, saying “this is an outrageous use of taxpayer money and an obvious attempt to offend Christians during the Christmas season,” and introducing the debate over whether federal funds should have been used to support *Hide/Seek* (Starr 2010b).

A Fire In My Belly

After the exhibition came under fire from Republican Congressmen and conservative news media, the Smithsonian initially decided to defend the video. In its defense of *A Fire In My Belly*, the Smithsonian argued the video was not anti-Catholic, but rather a “surrealistic video collage filmed in Mexico expressing the suffering, marginalization and physical decay of those who were afflicted with AIDS” (Newsdesk 2010b). In reality, neither of the interpretations of the work as anti-Catholic or a comment on AIDS matches the artist’s original intent (Carr 2012, 1-6). While Wojnarowicz is best known for the artwork he made as a response to the AIDS crisis and in collaboration with the AIDS activist group ACT UP, Wojnarowicz filmed the footage for *A Fire In My Belly* in 1986, two years before his own diagnosis (Carr 2012, 343-391). Wojnarowicz survived an abusive childhood, working as a child prostitute in New York before beginning his career in the East Village avant-garde movement (Carr 2012, 10-28). These earlier works did not deal with AIDS, as Wojnarowicz did not become involved with the movement until his mentor Peter Hujar died from AIDS in 1987, and the artist himself was diagnosed in 1988 (Carr 2012, 377-78).

A Fire In My Belly takes the form of a stream of consciousness montage made up of images filmed at Teotihuacán in Mexico in 1986 and additional footage shot in New York.¹ The crucifix is one of many props Wojnarowicz brought to Mexico as part of the “vocabulary of symbols” seen throughout his oeuvre (Blinderman 1990, 22-25). The objects seen in the video are meant to symbolize larger ideas and universal concepts: the crucifix signifies spirituality, the coins denote money, a toy soldier suggests control, and the watch faces symbolize time (Carr 2012, 343). The ants in the video represent “human activity within pre-invented structures” and are shown interacting with various objects (Carr 2012, 343). In his own words, Wojnarowicz explains that “the film deals with ancient myth and its modern counterpart. It explores structures of power and control, using at times the fire ants north of Mexico City as a metaphor for social structure” (Carr 2012, 2). After Wojnarowicz’s death in 1991, scholars and curators began linking *A Fire In My Belly* with other AIDS-related works. Part of the confusion about the piece stemmed from the fact that Wojnarowicz included images and video originally used in *A Fire In My Belly* in his later work, but the original was never meant to be a comment on the experience of AIDS victims.

¹ For a version of the video similar to the one shown in *Hide/Seek* see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyLxVuUDBag>. The crucifix image can be seen at 1:49. BrooklynCC. “A Fire in my Belly,” *Youtube* video, 3:59, 14 December, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyLxVuUDBag>.

Smithsonian Response

While the Smithsonian's initial approach to quelling anger over the video was presenting alternative interpretations of *A Fire In My Belly*, it became clear that the institution would have to take a firmer stance on the video's future in *Hide/Seek*. Soon after CNSNews published its article on the exhibit on November 29th, the National Portrait Gallery began receiving angry phone calls, and Katz received several anti-Semitic emails after Donahue published Katz's email address online (Cembalest 2011a). Secretary Clough consulted with National Portrait Gallery Director Martin Sullivan, Undersecretary Kurin, and co-curator Ward before he called for the video's removal (Newsdesk 2010b; Stolberg and Taylor 2011). However, Clough did not consult with the Smithsonian Board of Regents before making his decision (Stolberg and Taylor 2011). The Board of Regents is the Smithsonian's top governing body and is in charge of electing the Secretary, controlling the budget, and otherwise upholding the institution's original mission. The Board consists of "the Chief Justice of the United States, the Vice President of the United States, three members of the United States Senate, three members of the United States House of Representatives, and nine citizens" (Smithsonian Institution 2014). On November 30th, Sullivan released an official statement, writing, "I regret that some reports about the exhibit have created an impression that the video is intentionally sacrilegious...it was not the museum's intention to offend" (Sullivan 2010). The statement also informed the public that the museum had removed the video. On December 7th, the Smithsonian released another statement explaining its belief that removing the video would prevent the closure of the entire exhibition and that the misreading of *A Fire In My Belly* "overshadowed the importance and understanding of the entire exhibition" (Newsdesk 2010b). While Clough hoped this action would end the conflict, Republican leaders continued to question the Smithsonian's use of federal money to fund *Hide/Seek*, keeping the exhibition in the spotlight.

Government Funding of the Arts

Republican leaders were not satisfied with the removal of the video, and several called for the closure of the exhibition. John Boehner presented the exhibition as an inappropriate use of taxpayer money and told the Smithsonian to either pull the exhibition or "be prepared to face tough scrutiny beginning in January when the new majority in the House moves to end the job-killing spending spree in Washington" (Starr 2010b). Other Republicans echoed this plan to drastically cut federal funding of the arts once they took over. Representative Eric Cantor said the Smithsonian should "be prepared for serious questions come budget time," while Appropriations Committee member Jack Kingston suggested an investigation into Smithsonian funding might entail "calling [Smithsonian officials] up in front of the Appropriations Committee, asking for some resignations, auditing all their budgets [and] all their books" (Starnes 2010; Starr 2010b). The Catholic League also wrote to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees to "reconsider [the] federal financing" of the Smithsonian, with Bill Donahue describing federal funding as "class discrimination" and writing "if it is wrong for the government to pick the pocket of the public to promote religion, it should be equally wrong to pick its pocket to assault it," providing yet another example of the conservative opposition to the use of federal funds in the presentation of *Hide/Seek* (Starr 2010b).

The federal funding these politicians were discussing is vital to the functioning of the Smithsonian. Created in 1846, the Smithsonian is a federal entity funded by a combination of federal funding, private donations, and trust funds (Boren 2006). In a 2010 report, the Smithsonian Institution stated that it received \$761.4 million from Congress, \$632.2 million of

which the Smithsonian used for salaries and expenses such as rent, utilities, maintenance, and other operating expenses. The remaining \$125 million funded the upkeep of the facilities. The Smithsonian claims to be 65% federally funded, the other money coming from trust funds made up of contributions from private sources and revenue from Smithsonian enterprises (Newsdesk 2009). Although the Smithsonian does not use federal contributions to directly fund exhibitions, this money does pay for the maintenance of the buildings in which they are displayed, as well as the salaries of the employees who run the exhibitions. While the National Portrait Gallery received \$5.8 million from the government for its operating expenses in 2010, several private donors and foundations including The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, The Calamus Foundation, and The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation directly funded *Hide/Seek* (Starr 2010b). The Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities, an organization connected to the National Endowment for the Arts, also helped fund the exhibition (Katz and Ward 2010). Although the Smithsonian emphasized that federal money is not directly allocated to mounting exhibitions, Republicans still threatened to cut funding, an act which is well within the power of Congress (Boren 2006; Starr 2010b).

The political Right was not the only group issuing threats to funding, as the removal of Wojnarowicz's video angered many of the very influential arts organizations the Smithsonian depends upon to fund its exhibitions. Those involved in the art world viewed the removal as an act of censorship as well as a breach of curatorial authority, arguing that an institution should not remove works once it has approved an exhibition (Dobrzynski 2011, 17). In a statement criticizing Clough's decision, the Association of Art Museum Directors wrote, "more disturbing than the Smithsonian's decision to remove this work of art is the cause: unwarranted and uninformed censorship from politicians and other public figures, many of whom, by their own admission, have neither seen this exhibition as a whole or [*sic*] this specific work" (Dobrzynski 2011, 20). Protests soon emerged in several cities, including one in New York organized by Art Positive that marched from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, a Smithsonian-affiliated institution. Several museums, including the New Museum, Smith College Museum of Art, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, organized screenings of *A Fire In My Belly* (Dobrzynski 2011, 20). Soon after Clough removed *A Fire In My Belly*, the Museum of Modern Art in New York announced it was acquiring the piece for its permanent collection (Dobrzynski 2011, 20). These responses clearly demonstrate the strong feelings on both sides of the debate surrounding the piece.

Even more serious were the threats aimed directly at the Smithsonian itself. The artist AA Bronson asked for his work *Felix, June 5, 1994*, a piece central to the exhibition, to be removed from *Hide/Seek* because of his anger over the exclusion of Wojnarowicz's work. Sullivan and curators Katz and Ward denied Bronson's request, as they believed further alteration of the exhibition would weaken the impact of the show (Newsdesk 2010c). The Smithsonian also received complaints from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, which contributed \$100,000 to *Hide/Seek*. Both the Andy Warhol and Mapplethorpe Foundations stated they would not provide funding for future exhibitions if the video were not restored (Stolberg and Taylor 2011). Secretary Clough, NPG Director Sullivan, and the Board of Regents were now dealing with a two-sided attack. The protests and response from the art sphere illustrated the danger of being accused of art censorship, yet once the Republicans took over in January they would pose another threat to Smithsonian funding. These Smithsonian leaders had to decide to either close the exhibition and further enrage the art sphere or face the possibility of debilitating funding cuts if the Republicans followed through with their threats.

Epilogue

Although neither Secretary Clough nor the NPG reinstated Wojnarowicz's *A Fire In My Belly* to the exhibition, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire In American Portraiture* remained open for its entire planned run. In a December 6th press release, the Smithsonian explained its decision to stand behind the exhibition and announced that signs reading, "This exhibition contains mature themes" had been installed at the gallery entrances in order to address the accusation of promoting homosexuality (Newsdesk 2010b). In the months following the removal of the video, the Smithsonian organized several events to discuss the public's concerns about the decision to remove *A Fire in My Belly*. In April, the Smithsonian also hosted a two-day forum entitled "Flashpoints and Fault Lines: Museum Curation and Controversy," which was open to the public and explored topics such as curatorial authority and hosting exhibitions in national museums (Newsdesk 2011b). These measures demonstrate the Smithsonian's attempt to address the concerns of both the conservative and art world critics.

The Smithsonian Board of Regents also organized an external panel to evaluate Clough's decision, which concluded that the *Hide/Seek* approval process should have involved more institutional leaders so that the museum could have better defended the exhibition. The panel also stated that the Smithsonian should not remove artwork from open exhibitions in the future (Stolberg and Taylor 2011). In response, Secretary Clough established a new advisory panel comprised of Smithsonian officials that would add more opinions to the exhibition planning process. He also created the position of Senior Art Advisor to serve as an "in-house arts troubleshooter" (Stolberg and Taylor 2011).

When the Republican Party gained a majority in Congress in January 2011, Republicans followed through with their campaign promise to cut spending by presenting a Continuing Resolution meant to lower the federal budget by \$100 billion (*The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations* 2011a; hereafter USHRCA). A summary of the Continuing Resolution explains how it aimed to "decrease discretionary funding," which included decreased funding for the arts (USHRCA 2011b). While the summary listed an amendment calling for a \$20.5 million decrease to the funding of the National Endowment for the Arts, Smithsonian funding is not mentioned (USHRCA 2011b). Speaker of the House John Boehner was highly involved in the subsequent debate over the budget, but he did not follow through with his threats to challenge Smithsonian funding (Hulse 2011). The House and Senate eventually passed a budget on April 8, 2011 in order to avoid a government shutdown (Hulse 2011). In this budget, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities faced a combined \$25 million budget cut, much less than the \$20.5 million cut to NEA funding discussed in the original resolution. The summary describes the budget of several institutions – including the Smithsonian – as being "largely sustained" (USHRCA 2011c). The federal budget for the 2012 fiscal year further cut funding of the National Endowment for the Arts, but the Smithsonian budget increased by \$52 million, much of which went to support the construction of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (Newsdesk 2011c; Trescott 2011).

On January 20, 2011 Clough released an official statement in which he discussed the difficulty of presenting exhibitions in publicly-funded institutions and his reasoning behind his decision to remove *A Fire In My Belly* (Newsdesk 2011a). To defend the presentation of *Hide/Seek* Clough wrote, "together they represent all facets of the American story, each part of which deserves to be told in a way that exposes people to our history, as well as presents new

ways of looking at the world” (Newsdesk 2011a). He believed he acted too hastily in removing the video and described it as “the most painful thing [he has] ever done,” but he does not view it as censorship (Boehm 2011). Clough explained the reasoning behind his decision to remove the video, stating that he believed that the negative media attention surrounding the controversy would “hijack” the exhibition and draw attention from the discussion it hoped to provoke. In September 2013, Clough announced that he would retire from his position as Secretary in October 2014, after six years in the position. During his time at the Smithsonian, Clough helped implement a five-year strategic plan that aimed to unify the Smithsonian Institution using an interdisciplinary approach, as well as to expand the institution’s educational programs and access to its digital archives (Newsdesk 2014).

Following its run at the National Portrait Gallery, *Hide/Seek: Difference Desire in American Portraiture* traveled to the Brooklyn Museum, an institution that saw its own highly-publicized controversy surrounding its inclusion of Chris Ofili’s *The Holy Virgin Mary* in a 1999 exhibition. Many, including New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, viewed this work as offensive due to its combination of religious imagery and elephant dung, and the museum received threats to funding similar to those fielded by the Smithsonian (Vogel 2014). When *Hide/Seek* traveled to the Brooklyn Museum and later the Tacoma Art Museum, curators reinstated *A Fire In My Belly* into the exhibition, allowing for future discussion over how the work’s reception at the Smithsonian differed from at these other venues. The controversy surrounding *A Fire In My Belly* certainly emphasizes the relevancy of debating federal arts funding, but its similarity to other stories such as the canceled Mapplethorpe exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery or the uproar over the Ofili piece prove it is not an isolated event and demonstrates the complex relationship between culture and politics.

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