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THE BALTIMORE SUN

October 16, 1999, Saturday ,FINAL

SECTION: EDITORIAL ,15A SATURDAY MAILBOX

LENGTH: 2898 words

BODY:

Art's critical eye from outside

The controversy over the British exhibit in the Brooklyn Museum of Art shows that people are still trying to make their personal opinions a public concern.

I don't understand why people still think they can define "art," and proceed to call it immoral.

In my opinion, art is, or should be, amoral. Art must not become entangled in popular, political or religious opinions; it should remain outside political bias, outside of religion and taboo.

It should analyze society, and try to give us greater understanding of our world.

I don't think it is up to anyone to decide in what way artists should do this.

Catholics, animal rights activists and other taxpayers undoubtedly have good intentions, but they really should pick their battles more carefully.

We have to distinguish between what is truly detrimental and what we just find immoral.

Bryna Zumer, Reisterstown

I'd like to compliment The Sun for its coverage of the Brooklyn Museum of Art's exhibition, "Sensation: Young British Artists From The Saatchi Collection."

Glenn McNatt's review of the show, "Sick or Art? It's designed to provoke," (Oct. 5) was particularly insightful about the intentions of these artists and museum director Arnold Lehman.

Mr. Lehman left Baltimore for Brooklyn, seeking to jump-start attendance at New York City's second-largest museum, which he has done.

Some art works have always been viewed as distasteful by a portion of the general public.

These include masterpieces such as Hieronymous Bosch's paintings of hell, Salvador Dali's work, Marcel Duchamps' "Urinal" and recent photographs by Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe.

These images may strike a nerve in some people, but they are memorable nonetheless.

The measure of whether something is a great work of art is how it is viewed by posterity.

Jonathan West, Bel Air

To portray as analogous the outrage triggered by Edouard Manet's paintings of nudes in the 1860s and that generated by Arnold Lehman's Brooklyn Museum of Art show is a display of arrogance that takes The Sun's penchant for selective moral outrage to a new low ("Faces in a crowd at the BMA," editorial, Oct. 10).

The Brooklyn Museum's director chooses to use the art world's equivalent to Dennis Rodman's formula for quick fame and fortune -- and The Sun panders to him, while insinuating that those offended by the exhibit are artistically challenged.

Manet's nudes offended society at large. The Brooklyn show ridicules and grievously insults a particular segment of society.

If I burn a cross on my front lawn, I will be convicted of a felony. If I do the same within the context of an art exhibit, will The Sun defend my art and assert that black taxpayers have responsibility to fund it in a democracy?

The venue doesn't transfigure or excuse violence or bigotry -- and taxes should support neither.

Paul H. Belz, Lutherville

Gregory Kane praises rock artists of the Fifties and Sixties for opposing Jim Crow, but he appears unaware of the stark contrast between their views and his with respect to access to art ("Freedom for arts requires freedom from public funds," Oct. 10) .

The musicians he cites thought that their art should be available to all, that none should be excluded from their audience.

Yet Mr. Kane would remove art he finds objectionable from the public sphere of the museum, where all can see it, to the upper-class ghetto, the private gallery.

He proposes to do this in the interest of fiscal responsibility.

But readers should not be deceived by conservatives such as Mr. Kane and New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who would have us believe they are the good shepherds of the taxpayer when they limit public access to art.

Mr Kane and his ilk believe that "art can, and should be provocative," so long as it does not provoke them and "may sometimes be offensive," so long as they are not the ones offended.

Alan Waldron, Baltimore

Capturing human spirit

Thank you for The Sun's coverage and editorial celebrating the recent opening of a permanent home for the Contemporary Museum of Baltimore in the Mount Vernon cultural district ("Four walls for museum without a home," Sept. 25 and " Contemporary art's new home," Sept. 30).

However, the review of the opening show in the new space, "Impact: Revealing Sources for Contemporary Art," may mislead some readers into thinking that the art of the past 30 years is primarily about "human absence and alienation," rather than the triumph of the human spirit and artistic innovation ("Isolation Chamber," Sept. 25).

Although the art of our time is fed by several streams, including minimalism, surrealism and pop art, its dominant aesthetic is anything but cold and mechanical.

In contrast to the preceding period, dominated by American abstract expressionism, contemporary art has returned to such subjects as politics, gender and the body. As a consequence, images of human beings or their actions are everywhere in our show.

MacArthur prize winner Ann Hamilton, for example, (whose work was illustrated in the review but curiously not mentioned in the text) almost always includes a human being in her Vermeer-like installations -- usually a woman who is silently working at some repetitive but poetic task.

The string of lights climbing to the ceiling by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, himself a victim of AIDS, is a memorial to the many friends he lost to the disease.

Formalist critic Clement Greenberg, who largely despised minimalism and pop art, would never have imagined that this show was "an extension of his idea taken to its logical extreme." Art of the last 30 years has been created in a negative response to Greenberg and his ideas.

Nevertheless, Greenberg, too, loved the presence of the artist's hand and the human image. He was Jackson Pollock's earliest important champion, but often claimed that the representational art of the old masters was his favorite art.

Most of contemporary art has been concerned with the human spirit in its most life-affirming and ennobling aspects.

Michael Salcman Baltimore

The writer is vice president of the board of trustees of the Contemporary Museum of Baltimore.

Giving needed aid to home caregivers

A 1998 Business Roundtable Survey found that the nation's employers believe elder care has eclipsed child care as employees primary concern. Statistics show that more of us have become or will become family caregivers.

Today, nearly one in every four U.S. households is giving care to persons 50 or older and an estimated 14.4 million full and part-time workers are balancing caregiving and job duties.

The unpaid family caregiver is the backbone of the nation's long-term care system, providing nearly 80 percent of home care.

According to a 1999 study at-home, long-term care, although nearly invisible, adds up to a \$196 billion annual subsidy of the U.S. health care system. In Maryland, caregivers provide 465 million hours of care a year, which has been valued at \$3.8 billion.

Despite the elderly's strong preference for home and community-based services, long-term care dollars are overwhelmingly spent on nursing home care. The availability of a family caregiver of ten chiefly determines whether a family member stays at home or must be moved to a nursing home.

At the same time, the population is aging and changes in family life -- high divorce rates, smaller families, more women in the work- place and geographic mobility -- tend to decrease the number and availability of family caregivers.

Timely caregiver support can extend families' ability to provide care and delay nursing home admissions. But about 50 percent of primary caregivers receive no outside assistance.

Research shows that most caregivers prefer help in the form of "services" to "dollars." Respite care is a much-needed service.

Typically, respite care provides temporary care of the disabled person, allowing the caregiver a necessary break.

Maryland's new respite care initiative is designed to make respite care services more readily available. Funds for respite care for children with emotional disturbances start at \$588,000 in the state's current budget and will increase to \$2.2 million in 2004.

Most respite care for seniors is funded by the Department of Human Resources. The Department of Aging also coordinates care and provides limited funding through the Senior Care Program. With a budget of \$7.1 million this year, this program should provide services for almost 3, 800 clients.

On the federal level, in his budget for the coming fiscal year, President Clinton has proposed a \$6.2 billion, five-year initiative to support family caregivers. It provides a \$1,000 tax credit to compensate middle class families for the costs of formal or informal long term care provided to persons of any age.

The measure would also establish a National Family Caregiver Support Program to provide caregivers with a wide range of needed support services, including respite care, home care services, counseling, information and referral.

Because 60 percent of Medicare enrollees do not realize that Medicare does not cover most long-term care, the president would also establish a campaign to educate them about Medicare's limitations and about evaluating long-term care options.

At long last, it appears that the federal government is recognizing what the states have long known: The family caregiver is an integral part of long term care delivery and needs some assistance in delivering that care.

Carolyn Krysiak, Baltimore

The writer represents the 46th Legislative District in the Maryland House of Delegates.

One-sided account of school class-size debate, Class size reduction has proven to be a useful tool in school reform, but it is most effective in conjunction with other useful tools, including better teaching.

Here's a hint for the uninitiated: be wary of essayists who begin by cautioning against those who lie with statistics.

Casey Lartigue Jr. suggests the push for reducing class size from the White House (and state houses around the country) is some sort of political con game.

He believes we should focus instead on improving teacher quality ("Clinton errs in politicizing the issue of class sizes," Opinion Commentary, Oct. 4).

I'm in favor of better teachers too, but I'm afraid Mr. Lartigue has given a one-sided account of the class size debate.

He explains that Eric Hanushek's assessment of some 277 studies concludes that smaller classes are not associated with better achievement.

But he does not note that reputable scholars at the University of Chicago and elsewhere have analyzed Mr. Hanushek's data and reached the opposite conclusion.

He explains that Japan has much larger classes than we do, but achieves better test scores.

But he does not note that Japan also has a powerful central ministry of education, a national curriculum, a program of national testing and a culture that stresses conformity over individualism -- all qualities anathema to political conservatives and libertarians, who seem to so envy Asian educational successes.

He explains that average class size in the United States has dropped substantially since the early 1960s, without any improvement in test scores.

But he does not note that test performance levels now are about the same as in the early 1960s overall -- and that performance among African- American and Hispanic children has improved substantially over this period.

This despite changes in the environment outside school (including increases in childhood poverty, central city concentrated poverty and one-parent households) that might be expected to lower academic performance.

He tells you that the Department of Education has flip-flopped on the class size issue.

But he doesn't note that this is a result of new and compelling evidence, such as Tennessee's Project STAR (Student Teacher Achievement Ratio).

In this large experiment, elementary schoolchildren were randomly assigned to different-size classes and their progress was monitored over several years.

Project STAR concluded that class size reduction resulted in substantial achievement gains. And those who gained the most were perhaps our neediest children: minority students attending inner-city schools.

I don't for a minute think reducing average class size will solve all our education problems, or that it necessarily is the most cost-effective strategy for achieving the benefits it brings.

But it is playing fast and loose with the facts to argue that the answers all are in and that those answers all are negative.

Class size reduction has proven to be a useful tool in school reform, but it is most effective in conjunction with other useful tools, including better teaching.

This is called whole school reform, and it ought to be the goal.

Karl L. Alexande, Baltimore

The writer is professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University.

Misinformation clouds discussion about vouchers

Baltimore's public schools would be greatly improved by instituting a voucher plan.

But, faced with the increasing pressure from communities for real education reform and documentation of the success of such reforms, opponents are fighting hard to keep control of the schools (" O'Malley opposes vouchers," Sept. 23).

To do so, they've launched an unprecedented misinformation campaign on school choice, perpetuating myths designed to alarm and attack citizens who want to improve schools.

Opponents of school choice contend that the best students from the best families will be funneled into the best schools and leave the worst students behind in the lousiest schools.

In fact, when given the barest chance, poor, undereducated and otherwise disadvantaged parents, leap at the

opportunity to affect their kids' education.

When we in the Republican Party talk about choice, we're talking about parents and students being able to choose the school right for them, instead of having to go to a school based on where they live.

We're talking about teachers choosing where they teach, instead of being assigned by the district and handed lesson plans by a steering committee.

And we're talking about principals who can bring in the best teachers, instead of being stuck with uncommitted teachers the district had to put somewhere.

When parents and teachers can pick their schools, schools have to work hard to attract them. That means schools have to be good to stay in business.

Some claim that vouchers would promote racism. But the sad fact is that Baltimore's schools are as segregated now as they were 45 years ago, when the Supreme Court declared racially segregated schools illegal.

Vouchers don't erode the separation of church and state, either. They go to parents, who decide where to send their children.

Government isn't compelling religious schooling.

I implore Baltimoreans to support school choice on Nov. 2 by voting Republican.

William A. Prohaska, Baltimore

The writer is first vice chairman of the Baltimore City Republican Party.

A life recovered for giving

The last years of Robert C. Badders, a recovering substance abuser who died Oct. 4 at 44 years old, were like those of many others, except that he lived beyond himself and for the good of others ("Robert C. Badders, 44, counselor, headed Home Maintenance Program," Oct. 11).

He was a carpenter for Light Street Housing, a nonprofit affordable housing agency in Baltimore. At virtually no charge, he fixed the roofs, windows, porches and walls of hundreds of old, poor and disabled people.

He also salvaged many of their hopes and dreams, while he also helped repair the bodies and spirits of other recovering addicts.

Mr. Badders was a long-haired, tattooed, joking, lanky man who had a dog named Fred, a pickup named "Truck" and work clothes that were air-conditioned.

He was an Army engineer in West Germany during the Vietnam War and then a merchant mariner on oiler ships serving other vessels in the Persian Gulf war.

More than once, he abused drugs and alcohol and more than once was recovering. With tough love, he counseled others on the steps and missteps he knew well.

Something about this East Baltimore man that reminded some of a biblical mission.

But he didn't consider his work divinely inspired. In recovery, he said he just wanted "to give, give and give again rather than take, take and take again."

Bob had a fine funeral, a celebration of life and faith. The minister had to cut short the parade of men and women -- young and old, white and black, recovering alcoholics and drug addicts -- who laughed and cried over the man with 30 tattoos and a hundred kind ways.

Mr. Badders' life as a merchant seaman was long over, but when the wind was up, he liked to sneak away and go sailing. His sister, Ginny Potter, said he would never have wanted to be put in a box in the ground.

At dawn last Saturday, as a brisk 12-knot breeze was blowing, Ms. Potter and her family sailed into the Chesapeake Bay.

They tacked into the wind, offered a prayer and spread some of his ashes on the waters. Then they cast roses and hyacinths on the waves.

They smiled over the thought of Bob Badders at sea and at peace.

Ernest F. Imhoff, Baltimore

GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S) Inaugural exhibition: Untitled, 1994, by Ann Hamilton is at the Contemporary Museum of Baltimore.

LOAD-DATE: November 3, 1999