Symbols into soldiers: Art, censorship, and religion

Notwithstanding almost two and a half centuries of separation of church and state, religious groups in the US have never given up the desire to impose their values and beliefs on society at large. Controversies around art with religious content persist with some regularity, generally spurred by private religious groups or conservative—or just sensation-seeking—media. The groups protesting an artwork are invariably small, but their strident voice is amplified by media coverage and somehow becomes representative even though it may not be.

BY SVETLANA MINCHEVA • OCTOBER 2012

It is ironic to begin an article on the censorship of art in the US when mass media, politicians, religious leaders and just about everyone else is trumpeting the nation’s commitment to free speech. If we can just make them understand, the thinking goes, how important free speech, i.e. the freedom to say things that may offend somebody else’s feelings or beliefs, is to a democracy—no, more, to humanity itself—the riots would stop. Well, no, they won’t: And not because the Middle East, or a fraction of it, is constitutionally incapable of understanding free speech, but because those fomenting the riots have no use for it; on the contrary, they capitalize on outrage. And so, in spite of current protestations, do their Western counterparts. Nurtured for generations on First Amendment principles, religion-based interest groups in the US conveniently abandon those principles when it suits them.

Symbols can be potent political soldiers that can mobilize constituencies and inspire them to go to battle for what are always, ultimately, political goals: the pursuit of social and cultural hegemony. And those who deal in religious symbols know that better than anyone. The tactics vary with local conditions, the strategy remains the same: attribute a simple and maximally offensive intention to an image, a film, play or artwork and use it to trigger long standing grievances, while also mobilizing and radicalizing your constituency by creating the impression that they are engaged in a war and that their most cherished values are under attack.

On an otherwise peaceful October afternoon in 2010, a woman armed with a crowbar entered the Loveland Museum/Gallery in Colorado, slammed and broke the Plexiglas case holding Enrique Chagoya’s lithograph The Misadventures of Romantic Cannibals, then reached in and ripped out the work screaming: “How can you desecrate my Lord?” The act of violence against an inanimate object apparently testifies about the power of images to arouse
strong emotions, which include the desire to suppress, even destroy them, at any cost. But it may, in fact, tell us a lot more about politics, about how images can be exploited.

The woman who wielded the crowbar didn’t just happen upon the image, she was a trucker who drove all the way from Montana incensed by sensationalizing media reports about a work that desecrated a religious symbol; the first time she encountered the work it was with the intention to destroy it. It is doubtful she even looked at the work once she identified it.

*The Misadventures* had been the subject of local and national controversy for a few weeks before the attack, because, among multiple other images from popular culture, it collaged an image of the head of Jesus Christ with the body of a woman engaged in a sexual act. The artist stated his intention as a criticism of the sexual abuse rampant in the Catholic Church. Whether you buy this interpretation or not, an image is not like a verbal statement in that its meaning is open for multiple interpretations. Those savvy enough to exploit this can mobilize their constituencies by interpreting the image as a deliberate attack on their values and beliefs: In this case they were successful enough to inspire the Montana trucker to violence.

One of the often-noted paradoxes of US censorship battles today is that, rather than suppressing a work, they give it more visibility. Indeed, not only did *The Misadventures* get exponentially more publicity because of the controversy and subsequent attack, but some of the best-known artwork in the last twenty years is work that has been the focus of censorship attempts. Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ*, Chris Ofili’s *Holy Virgin Mary*, and Robert Mapplethorpe’s *X Portfolio* have all successfully migrated from the specialized art niche to the much more widely read news press.

If to suppress an individual work were indeed the goal, censorship today miserably fails. But, if the goal is to assert power, mobilize the anger of key constituencies and force exhibiting institutions to second-guess themselves next time they are about to show a “controversial” work, then they are singularly successful.

Periods of iconoclasm, when images were destroyed on a massive scale in an effort to eradicate the dangerous symbolism they contain, recur through history and invariably accompany shifts in political and religious power. Political power battles find both expression and additional fuel in attacks on symbolic objects. Before the Taliban blew up the images of the Buddha in Bamiyan Valley in 2001, King Hezekiah purged the Temple of Jerusalem of idols and destroyed Moses’ bronze serpent, early Christianity destroyed sculptures of the Roman gods, Protestant reformers attacked Catholic statues, Pueblo Indians burned and dismembered crucifixes in their war against Spanish colonizers, and the Soviet revolution destroyed churches. (Less than a century later images of Soviet leaders were themselves destroyed, proving that secular political idols can be just as hated – and potentially dangerous – as religious ones.)

The historical clash today is not so much between religions as between religion and secularism. Secular art today is as much part of the public sphere as religious art or political monuments, even more so. However, for the secular artist religious symbols are part of a shared cultural heritage and thus a language, a tool of communication. They can be used to say many things, including things that assault religious dogma. Within still living religious traditions, however, these same symbols have a fixed and vigilantly guarded meaning. An assault on these symbols – and be this assault no more than a non-traditional interpretation – is a threat to their dominance of religious values and beliefs.

The resurgence of religious fundamentalism around the world together with nationalist retrenchment in countries who view the incursion of Western neo-liberalism and secularism with hostility is inevitably bringing more and more clashes between secular art and religious dogma. These clashes occur in the West no less that in the East. But depending on how much political power religion wields in a specific place, as well as in how strong the rule of law is, they can result in deadly riots or in the suppression of art and punishment of curators, in physical attacks and threats or in the subtler pulling of the purse strings.

Religious groups in the US, notwithstanding almost two and a half centuries of separation of church and state, have never given up the desire to impose their values and beliefs on society at large. When direct pressure to suppress what they disapprove of has failed, they have been forced to disguise it as something more palatable to a secular audience: as the need to uphold “decency” and the values of community. In the 19th century, due to a much more
homogeneous mainstream culture, where an economic elite shared a set of values with an intellectual elite, religious values could still dominate disguised as universal values of “decency and morality”; in the late 20th century religious groups were finding themselves increasingly weaker and the values they espoused were no longer unquestioningly perceived as universal. Perceiving the loss of cultural and political hegemony in increasingly diverse and secular societies, religious groups needed to mobilize their constituencies and increase their influence. In the late 1980s a solution was found: target the arts!

The arts as a political weapon in the culture wars

The fight over what art public money should fund and what art public museums should exhibit became both common ground and organizing principle for a coalition between the religious right and fiscal conservatives. The former wanted to prevent any challenge to their dogma from entering the public sphere blessed by federal funds (and that included discussions of homosexuality, AIDS, sex, feminist rants, as well as criticism of the Church), the latter just didn’t want federal funds to go to the arts (of all social programs they would consider “inessential” the arts were, perhaps, the most vulnerable). In a brilliant move, religious activists took hold of the rhetoric of taking offense and victimhood from feminism and identity politics and turned it to their own ends, fiscal conservatives just continued an established discourse of government waste. The result: the 1990s culture wars over public funding in the arts.

The work that was used to trigger right-wing activism was an image of a crucifix: Andres Serrano’s photograph Piss Christ, a provocatively titled but luminously beautiful photograph of a plastic crucifix in a golden fluid, declared to be the artist’s urine. The photograph had been part of an exhibition that had travelled to ten cities without incident, and had closed by the end of January of 1989. Three months later the Rev. Donald E. Wildmon, a minister from Tupelo, Miss., founder of the American Family Association (formerly the National Federation for Decency), a conservative fundamentalist Christian advocacy organization, sent a letter to members of Congress and others singling out one photograph from the travelling exhibition, describing it as a “plastic crucifix submerged in the artist’s urine” and claiming it represented “demeaning disrespect and desecration of Christ”. A month later US Senator Alfonse D’Amato tore up the exhibition catalogue on the Senate floor and launched an attack on the federal arts funding agency, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

It was in the ensuing dramatic displays of congressional outrage over Piss Christ and, soon after, over the explicit homosexual images in photographer Robert Mapplethorpe’s retrospective, that the main premise of the culture wars was formed: Restricting taxpayer money from supporting such “offensive” work was not censorship, because, after all, these artist were free to create the work on their own dime. It was, rather, a condition put on government sponsorship of the arts. The First Amendment in no way obliges government to provide funding for the arts and, if the NEA, which had supported both Andres Serrano and the Mapplethorpe retrospective, didn’t bring its act together, it could easily be terminated.

The decade long struggle, enacted publicly in Congress and the media led, in 1995, to the termination of the NEA individual grants to artists program and, in 1998, to the upholding, by the US Supreme Court, of a clause requiring the NEA, when awarding grants, to take into consideration “general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public.”

In itself, the decency clause did not have much effect, but the relentless attacks of the culture wars left art institutions fearful of controversy and much more willing to censor themselves. The media success of attacks on art also further encouraged opportunistic politicians and religious leaders to seek popularity or expand their membership base by standing up for supposedly offended constituencies.

Thus, hoping to ride the momentum of the culture wars into a Senatorial seat, in 1997, then-New York Mayor Rudi Giuliani decided, as a Catholic himself, to take public offense at a mixed media work by British-Nigerian artist Chris Ofili to be displayed at the city-funded Brooklyn Museum of Art visiting exhibition, Sensation. But controversy can feed more than one politician’s ambition: the Catholic League, an organization that exponentially grew its membership while stirring up controversy over anything that could potentially be seen as offensive to Catholics, also immediately joined the fray.
There was no question of an individual encountering the work and responding with shock and offense: The controversy started before the show had even opened. A reporter for the New York tabloid, The Daily News, in the process of working on an article called Brooklyn Gallery of Horror/ Gruesome Show Stirs Controversy, described the work in the show to Giuliani’s office and to Catholic League president Bill Donahue and asked for their response. The response was immediate and outraged: strongly worded statements, press conferences asking the Museum to remove the work from the show, mass protests against the exhibition – but also demonstrations in support of the museum – and, finally, a lawsuit.

In the process of sensationalizing it the work was entirely misrepresented as depicting dung “smeared” or “splattered” on the Virgin, when, in fact, there were three bejeweled clumps of what the artist said was elephant dung, placed at the foot of the work and one where the Virgin’s breast would be. For the Nigerian/British Ofili, elephant dung reportedly had symbolic significance and was a recurring material in his work. When art is mobilized in the service of controversy, however, careful interpretation is counterproductive. That The Holy Virgin was one of the least provocative pieces in the show and its creator was himself a practicing Catholic did not slow down the production of outrage one little bit.

Guiliani failed in his attempt to suppress The Holy Virgin Mary, as well as in his attempt to evict the Museum from its city-owned space, but that did not stop him from grandstanding again a few years later when Renee Cox’s Yo Mama’s Last Supper, displayed again at the Brooklyn Museum, featured the artist, nude, in the position of Christ in the center of her photographic re-creation of the Last Supper. In response, and aware this time that he cannot force the Museum to remove the piece, Giuliani announced the formation of a “decency commission” to supervise programming at all city funded museums. The initiative was forgotten when the World Trade Center was hit on 9/11/2001 and the Mayor found a worthier crusade.

Controversies around art with religious content persist with some regularity, generally spurred by private religious groups or conservative – or just sensation-seeking – media. The groups protesting an artwork are invariably small, but their strident voice is amplified by media coverage and somehow becomes representative even though it may not be. At a distance the protesters are all we see: the vast majority who don’t protest are not “newsworthy”. Even though social studies say that the majority of the US population takes moderate positions on art controversies, the rhetoric of a culture war creates the impression of a nation deeply divided, where protesting religious groups loom larger than they really are. This rhetoric focuses on offended feelings and the misuse of tax dollars, but controversies always reveal a wealth of underlying tensions that far exceed the neat categories of a simple culture war. It is these long-standing tensions that account for the intensity of passion, which would seem excessive if it were just in reaction to a piece of artwork safely ensconced in a museum gallery.

The 2001 debate over Alma Lopez’ Our Lady, a digital photo-collage of a defiant Virgin of Guadalupe, naked but for the flowers in which she was covered, exhibited at the Santa Fe Museum of International Folk Art, became a proxy for discussing issues of insider Latinos and outsider Anglos, and a flashpoint of an internal conflict between New Mexico traditional Latinos and less-traditionally bound ones like the artist, a gay woman using the symbols of Mexican Catholicism in ways designed to subvert a male patriarchal tradition.

The Santa Fe Museum held a town hall meeting to let the debate air itself – it even had to change the venue to accommodate the busloads of organized Catholics – but kept the work on display, albeit for a shortened duration. However, one of the most recent high-profile censorship incidents involving a museum is also, unfortunately, one in which the institution – in this case the venerable Smithsonian – took a particularly contemptible course.

A month into the 2010 Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture exhibition the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery a right wing media group published an inflammatory article attacking some of the works in the show, the Catholic League immediately declared offense and, soon after, two of the leading Republicans in Congress, Reps. John Boehner and Eric Cantor, threatened the Secretary of the Smithsonian with funding cuts if a 1987 video included in the show, Fire in My Belly by David Wojnarowicz, were not removed. Smithsonian Secretary Clough, in an overly hasty move, had the piece taken down within hours.
The stated reason for requesting the removal of the work was that the representation, in the video, of a crucifix with ants crawling on it was an outright insult to Catholics. This was not the case: Wojnarowicz may have hated the Catholic establishment, but, raised a Catholic himself, he identified with the suffering Christ. Yet, as appears to be the rule, interpreting the meaning of the piece was the last thing on the mind of its attackers. Besides, the true, yet unspoken, religious offense offered by the show was the very fact that the venerable institution like the Smithsonian had dared devote an exhibition to art by and about homosexuals, when the Catholic Church condemns homosexuality and when the country is locked in a political conflict over the legalization of gay marriage.

The focus on the crucifix and denial of the real source of offense is indicative of a cultural shift since the early 1990’s culture wars, when federal arts funding was challenged by right-wing republicans in Congress specifically objecting to representations of homosexuality in some of the art funded by the NEA. Twenty years of gay and AIDS activism, attacks on homosexuality are much more careful (with some exceptions). Yet the discourse of believers taking offense at the abuse of their sacred symbols is rampant.

The chorus of voices trumpeting freedom of speech in the face of protest riots in the Middle East, which was mentioned at the start of this essay, is not entirely univocal: there are quite a few voices that emphasize the fact that, even in the US, free speech is not an absolute and that speech that is so flagrantly offensive as to cause riots should also be regulated.

The right to offend

In the abstract, free speech is an article of faith in the United States, yet many would hesitate if asked whether free speech includes “the right to offend.” A disturbing 43 per cent of Americans do not think people should be allowed to say things in public that might be offensive to religious groups, according to a 2009 survey conducted by the First Amendment Center. The fact that something is offensive – or could be offensive to some group – has become a sufficient stand-alone moral (if not legal) justification for censorship.

Paradoxically, in the United States, where blasphemy laws go against the constitution, it is not the religious right, but the socially progressive left that pioneered the latest imperative not to offend. Concerned about equality and creating an even playing field in a country haunted by a history of slavery, oppression of women as well as of ethnic and sexual minorities, the left introduced political correctness as an acute awareness of the historically enshrined prejudices underlying social institutions. Political correctness brought about a wave of linguistic self-policing, one of the goals of which was to avoid offending various minorities. Even as the political right made fun of PC, the exacerbated sensitivity to offense it legitimized was a boon to religious groups who quickly appropriated the discourse of victimization.

The left objects to offensive material, which demeans women with sexist representations or perpetuates racist stereotypes by permitting the use of racist terms. The religious right is ever vigilant for anything they perceive as denigrating religious symbols. Each side claims that an important right is threatened by unrestricted offensive speech: Disrespect for women or ethnic and racial minorities is interpreted as an assault on their rights to equal protection under the law, while disrespect for religious symbols is interpreted as an infringement on religious liberty. So a balancing test is called for, where some constitutional rights (like freedom of speech) need to be curtailed in favor of other constitutional rights.

But is there really a conflict between these rights? Regulating speech in the service of equality is not only patronizing of the minority groups that are supposedly protected, it frequently affects precisely the speech of these groups: well meaning advocates for the prohibition of pornography should remember, for instance, that bans on sexually explicit material have disproportionately affected information about women’s sexuality. Banning the freedom to offend religion may be the end of authentic religious liberty, as the Supreme Court insisted in Cantwell v. Connecticut, a 1940 landmark case defining free exercise of religion. In that case, Jesse Cantwell, a Jehovah’s Witness, played a record with an anti-Catholic message in a Catholic neighborhood. He was arrested for “disturbing the peace” and “incitement to riot,” but the Court upheld Cantwell’s right to proclaim his message, noting that “the tenets of one man may seem the rankest error to his neighbor.” Indeed, the tenets of one religion often conflict with
that of another: proclaiming them passionately may well offend, but it is also part and parcel of the right to practice one’s religion freely.

It is impossible to do justice here to either the arguments or counterarguments for balancing rights. Suffice it to say that the discussion is ongoing that the camp of those who take exception to offensive speech is growing. While First Amendment law still makes no exception for offensive speech, the force of public opinion, hate speech codes in academia, and often-misunderstood harassment laws at the workplace, all encourage self-censorship. While regulating one’s own speech so as not to offend others may be a good thing, the rhetoric of offense has also been used as justification to threaten institutions with physical violence or with loss of funding, thus triggering a kind of self-censorship that endangers the cultural life of the country.

**Self-censorship: the rising tide of fear**

In 1998, the Manhattan Theater Club – after briefly announcing a cancellation – decided to proceed with its production of Terrence McNally’s *Corpus Christi* (a retelling of the Jesus story, with Jesus as a gay man living in 1950s Corpus Christi, TX) in spite of threats of violence and bomb threats. Security was tight and the protests remained peaceful. A mere three years later, in October 2001, warnings of possible protest and violent action by members of the Watts community were enough to cause the cancellation of Alex Donis’ show *WAR* scheduled to for the Watts Towers Art Center. The show consisted of a series of paintings depicting pairs of LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) officers and gang members in same-sex dancing poses.

Had the attacks of 9/11 suddenly made violence more of a reality for Americans or were traumatic memories of the 1965 Watts riots still powerful? Perhaps both, but after 9/11 fear of violence certainly acquired a reality it didn’t heretofore have. The explosion of riots triggered by the Danish Mohammed cartoons in 2005 exacerbated this fear. Most US press refused to re-print the cartoons in marked contrast to their previous publication of images of other controversial artwork.

In 2009 Yale University outraged the academic and free speech communities by deciding to strip all images of Mohammed from *The Cartoons that Shook the World*, by Jytte Klausen, a scholarly review of the events surrounding the cartoon controversy. To justify the decision, University officials cited concerns that the book might stimulate violence “somewhere in the world,” even though no actual threats had been received. In a Statement of Principle and Call to Action, national organizations like the American Association of University Professors and the National Coalition Against Censorship warned against the spread of pre-emptive self-censorship as a result of fear of violence:

“... [O]ur long-standing commitment to the free exchange of ideas is in peril of falling victim to a spreading fear of violence. Not only have exhibitions been closed and performances canceled in response to real threats, but the mere possibility that someone, somewhere, might respond with violence has been advanced to justify suppressing words and images... The possibility of giving offense and provoking violence has entered the imagination of academic institutions, curators, publishers and the public at large, generating more and more incidents of preemptive self-censorship.”

Yale was responding – or perhaps over-reacting – to a radically new world situation, where communications are instantaneous, but where cultural and political differences are still enormous. How do we know whether a book from an academic press may not be used to stimulate violence in some far away country with no free speech tradition and plenty of sectarian violence? And if we cannot know, should we self-censor?

In the meantime, religious groups were capitalizing on the climate of fear: In 2007, the private Manhattan gallery where Cosimo Cavallaro’s chocolate life-size sculpture of Jesus, *My Sweet Lord* was to be exhibited in 2007 cancelled the show because it reportedly received death threats following a radio broadcast where Bill Donohue, President of the Catholic League, attacked the piece as “one of the worst assaults on Christian sensibilities ever.”

The tactic of threatening violence is not the sole province of religious extremists. In 2008 the San Francisco Art Institute cancelled *Don’t Trust Me*, an exhibition by Algerian-born French artist Adel Abdessemed, consisting of
video footage of animals being killed by a single blow from a sledgehammer, in response to threats of violence
directed at staff members and their families by animal-rights activists.

When it happens in response to threats of violence, self-censorship remains highly visible, not so, however, when
it materializes fears of lost funding. And with the worsening financial health of the country, such fears are well
founded. The worst legacy of the culture wars of the 1990s is that it made arts funding into a politically vulnerable
target.

While the First Amendment bars enraged public officials like former New York Mayor Giuliani from punishing a
museum because of the content of its programming, there is nothing to stop legislators from slashing funds for the
arts ostensibly because, at a time when public funds are limited, something needs to go. It was enough, in 2010, for a
couple of leading Republicans in Congress to hint that the Smithsonian may face funding cuts if one of the works were
not removed from a show at one of its member museums, for Smithsonian Secretary Clough to have the piece taken
down within hours. Decisions to censor a show or even entirely cut it from a museum’s programming are, most
frequently, made earlier on in the process and remain hidden from the public; hence, the bulk of institutional self-
censorship is invisible.

Even without a direct threat to their funding, art institutions are afraid of challenging legislatures. In 2006, for
instance, The Ann Arbor Film Festival, the oldest experimental film festival in the country, had its state-funding cut
because some legislators claimed it had violated the Michigan’s prohibition on the use of public funds to support
work that includes depictions of flag desecration, sex acts, or human waste on religious symbols. The prohibition was
clearly unconstitutional. However, no art institution in the state was willing to challenge it for fear funding for arts
and libraries, already under attack in Michigan, would be entirely terminated. Eventually, the ACLU filed suit on
behalf of the Festival (which had already decided to forego state funding) and the state voluntarily dropped the
funding restrictions.

Fear of lost funding on an institutional level is not limited to publicly funded institutions. Arguably it is even
more of an issue in private institutions where donors may withdraw support at will and where no First Amendment
imperatives prohibit them from discriminating against viewpoints they do not like. In 2008, for instance, the Spertus
Museum in Chicago, a privately supported Jewish institution, was pressured to close down a show on maps and
mapping when museum funders exercised their veto insisting the show was anti-Israel.

Institutional fears are replicated on the personal level: curators working on temporary contracts and untenured
art professors curating student art shows regularly run into censorship, but blowing the whistle on such censorship
and standing up for the artists involved can cost them their jobs. In 2011, the position of Elizabeth Dunbar, associate
director and the only full-time curator of Arthouse in Austin, TX was terminated. Just before being fired Dunbar had
taken the artists’ side in two controversies involving the museum, one of which entailed the turning off of a video
installation during prime viewing hours over concerns that it may be inappropriate for teens. The artist had never
been consulted. After outcry, the installation was restored to view, but a guard was placed in front of it to prevent
young people from entering. When cutting Dunbar’s position, the institution cited budged cuts, though a 6.6 million
renovation had just expanded its exhibition space threefold. One of the members of the institution’s board resigned in
protest.

What is trickiest about self-censorship is that the bulk of it remains unseen – but occasionally we see glimpses
and the picture is alarming.

Coda
Attempts to regulate what the public sees are frequently inspired by religious beliefs. And controlling the use of
religious symbols forms a rather small proportion of the material religious groups seek to regulate. The bulk of work
generating controversy in the US today features nudes, gay and lesbian material and sexually explicit content. One
can easily trace the censorship of such work to the imperatives of certain monotheisms. Religion, after all, is not just
about a particular story of creators and messiahs; it is also about regulating how life is lived.
Since the late 1980s, a rhetoric of offense focusing on the use of religious symbols, but by far not limited to them, has been harnessed to create larger-than-life media scandals and radicalize and mobilize religious constituencies. This perpetuates the impression of a sharply polarized country and, perhaps, even helps to bring about such a country. Worst of all, it becomes a contributing factor in the wave of fear that makes self-censorship the order of the day.

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Footnotes

i The mechanisms of the Middle Eastern protests over the Innocence of Muslims have been widely analyzed. Suffice it to note here that it was an Egyptian Salafist TV host, Sheikh Khaled Abdullah, who brought the video to the Egyptian audience on September 8 on the satellite-TV station al-Nas. (Not that the video’s producers would have minded such exposure, they were just incapable of getting it.) The broadcast triggered Salafist-led protests that may have been anti-US and anti-Western on their face, but whose less obvious goal was to draw away supporters from the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt’s de facto ruling party.

ii Steven C. Dubin, How “Sensation” Became a Scandal, Art in America, Jan 2000, 88, 1, p.53

iii Princeton University’s Center for Arts and Cultural Policy studies has produced some key research on the subject as part of their project Conflicts Over Art, Cultural Expression and Social Values in American Society, led by Paul DiMaggio. www.princeton.edu/~artspol/proj6.html

iv Exploring the reasons Michigan legislators suddenly became interested in an experimental film festival reveals one more story of art being used as a political weapon. An essay written by a representative of the Mackinac Center, a libertarian organization, argued that taxpayers’ dollars should not go to the arts. To build its argument, the essay named several films from the Ann Arbor Film Festival as exemplifying the type of content (implicitly scandalous) that state arts funding was supporting. It was after that essay circulated among state legislators that funding for the Ann Arbor Film Festival was threatened.