

Canceled: Alternative Manifestations and Productive Failures

The Center for Book Arts

Should an artist trade institutional and external pressures for a future reward, or hold out? Put another way: when and how should an artist or an institution say 'no'? Such quandaries lay at the heart of 'Canceled: Alternative Manifestations and Productive Failures'. This somewhat cluttered yet thought-provoking exhibition, organized by Lauren van Haften-Schick, collected more than 25 case studies, and other related materials, to meditate on how artist and sponsor relations break down and, more importantly, on what comes after such disagreements or disconnects.

Take, for example, a 1972 series of letters between the Whitney Museum of American Art and the artist Jo Baer. The exchange began as an invitation: would the artist like to have a solo exhibition in the museum? In accepting, Baer replied with a proposal to show her recent 'hard-edged' paintings – the then au courant school of Minimalist painting that dealt in bare geometric abstractions – in the context of her older and stylistically different work. To do so, she required a decent amount of space; the museum was, at first, enthusiastic. However, as the correspondence continued, the discussion turned into a one-sided hardball negotiation in which the Whitney pared down its offer to give Baer only enough space to show the newer work – the reasons for which could have been pragmatic, but could also have masked some ulterior motive.

It is almost taken for granted that a major museum exhibition will offer an artist a fair amount of exposure, if not prestige. As such, the institution has leverage; an artist's insecurity bemoans letting gainful opportunities pass by, and the fear of antagonising people is strong, especially in a collegial field such as the fine arts. Baer understood this situation and, in the most tactful of ways, replied to the museum's ultimatum with the phrase: 'No, thanks.' Achieving a bit of a media coup, her work was subsequently praised in both Art News and Artforum, which, in its own way, lead the museum to reconsider and to finally present, in

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1975, a Baer retrospective on the artist's terms. The rest, as they say, is (art) history.

Joining the Baer incident – represented in this show with a copy of the letters, the articles and a catalogue essay from the 1975 show – were some obvious, and yet key, examples of these issues. There was, of course, Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971), a collection of photographs documenting the eponymous museum trustee Harry Shapolsky's slums, which lead to the cancellation of Haacke's show at the Guggenheim. Alongside this was Christoph Büchel's lawsuit against Mass MoCA for displaying the artist's budget-plagued and unfinished *Training Ground for Democracy* in 2006, and the more recent removal – spearheaded by Republican Congressmen John Boehner and Eric Cantor as a means to advance various heteronormative political rhetorics – of David Wojnarowicz's video *A Fire in my Belly* (1989) from the Smithsonian's 'Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture' in 2010.

Instead of producing a one-dimensional exhibition – in which the figure of the artist could be seen as some heroic guardian of free speech against the ills of limiting censorship – Van Haaften-Schick wisely flipped the focus toward the slew of print evidence surrounding each case. For Büchel, for example, the court record itself was the main thrust of the display, while statements by Wojnarowicz's estate against the removal were coupled with the piece itself.

As the title of the show suggests, these controversies might have been a greater means of stirring debate than any exhibition or work alone could have done. Yet more importantly, a secondary theme emerged from 'Canceled': how artists make stands not only against censorship, but as a refusal to self-sacrifice in the name of easy, if not chimerical, success. Conflating this issue well beyond the normative sphere of art, the exhibition cumulatively asked: what kind of chilling effect would be produced if Baer and, with her, more artists caved in and said, 'yes, please' to any powers that be?

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