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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

When Controversy and Failure Become Art

by [Alexis Clements](#) on [May 29, 2012](#)



Installation view of "Canceled" at the Center for Book Arts (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

One of the first works you come across as you enter the exhibition [Canceled: Alternative Manifestations and Productive Failures](#), now on display at the Center for Book Arts, is "A Fire in My Belly." This video work by David Wojnarowicz became the [focal point of a controversy](#) when Republican Congressmen John Boehner and Eric Cantor used it as the scapegoat in an attack on the exhibition *Hide/Seek*, which was comprised largely of work by LGBT artists and opened at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, in December 2010.

"The documents, language and narrative of controversy,

As has been the case in the past, conservative leaders used their Congressional bully pulpit to raise the specters of pornography and religious

Open censorship and failure become a new form of work to consider.”

blasphemy, in order to quash public representations of LGBT individuals. The rest is history repeated. Wojnarowicz’s piece was removed from the exhibition, [which stayed open without it](#), and was later restored to the show when it [transferred to the Brooklyn Museum](#) in late 2011.

What this new display of “A Fire in My Belly” at the Center for Book Arts does is show the piece in combination with statements from Wojnarowicz’s estate, the P.P.O.W. Gallery (which represents the estate) and *Hide/Seek* curator Jonathan Katz. Also included is a copy of the original catalogue from the first exhibition in which the work appeared, at Artists Space in 1989. Titled *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, the show was a collective artistic response to the then-worsening AIDS crisis taking place in New York City.



Installation view of "Canceled" (click to enlarge)

This accumulation of materials attempts to offer an entirely new way of seeing the work, a way that includes its past and present, as well as materials that illuminate the narrative that arose as people in power attempted to eliminate the video from view and, in a sense, from history. *Canceled* treats these texts as objects of interest all their own. The documents, language and narrative of controversy, censorship and failure become a new form of work to consider.

Down the wall from “A Fire in My Belly” is one of the most complicated pieces on display, both in terms of the artist’s original concept as well as the artifacts of its attempted erasure. Titled “Becoming Tarden,” the work is by the artist Jill Magid, who was commissioned to create a piece about the Dutch secret service, AIVD, that would be displayed in the AIVD’s new building and that the government hoped would help humanize the agency.

Magid undertook interviews with various agents at AIVD and, among other realizations of the work, composed a novel based on those interviews and her experiences working with the agency. There was a successful exhibition of the project under the title *Article 12*, in 2008, at a gallery in The Hague. But in 2010, when she attempted to exhibit the novel manuscript at the Tate Modern, this time under the title *Authority to Remove*, she conceded to have two AIVD agents come and remove the manuscript from the museum after they objected to its display. She has subsequently published a redacted version as “Becoming Tarden.”

While it’s difficult to piece together all of this from the artifacts on display at the Center for Book Arts, the story, once you grasp it, is fascinating. The Dutch government commissioned Magid to undertake the project, she successfully executed it with AIVD’s full knowledge and cooperation and then exhibited it,

Openly to have the government decide a couple of years later that it needed to censor the work when it began to garner attention. The letters between the artist and the government agency are the most revealing. They demonstrate the absurdity of a government agency attempting to engage with a rigorous artist without understanding that it is in turn opening itself up to both critique and some level of exposure.

Aside from politically motivated cancellations, other pieces in the exhibition reveal the narratives that build up when artworks either offend or expose major funders at the institutions where the works are to be exhibited. The two primary examples of this are documents from *Imaginary Coordinates*, curated by Rhoda Rosen at the Spetus Museum in 2008, and the cancelled solo show of work by Hans Haacke, which was meant to take place at the Guggenheim Museum in 1971.



Installation view of "Canceled" (click to enlarge)

In the case of *Imaginary Coordinates*, which featured a collection of antique maps representing different demarcations of the area that today comprises Israel and Palestine, two major funders for the museum led the effort to shut down the show for being “anti-Israel.” Museum leadership complied in the end because they did not want to risk losing the money the funders provided. In the case of the Haacke exhibition, some of the works demonstrated the slumlord practices of individuals with ties to the Guggenheim’s Board of Trustees. Four weeks before the show was due to open, it was cancelled.

These kinds of controversies have had obvious and lasting effects on the arts. Today, there is a much greater reluctance to present work that is either politically or socially challenging to funders. There’s also a deep conservatism regarding work that is potentially offensive, particularly to the kind of people who populate museum and foundation boards. The flip side, however, is that we are all also becoming savvy cynics who know too well that controversy itself can be a goal for some artists and institutions. Hungry for attention or dollars, these people present work that is superficially controversial, often containing pornography, biological matter, live animals or religious iconography, but the art contains no real meaning or critique.

So we find ourselves in a time when less truly risky work is commissioned and displayed, but there is an abundance of the tropes of controversy. And these tropes are often quickly co-opted by ad agencies to generate new products or brand identities for corporations and companies that are anything but politically radical. Thankfully, the curator of the show, Lauren van Haaften-Schick, has chosen artistic work that has clear rigor behind it. This provides the opportunity to examine the results of cancellation not as simplistic controversies but rather as complicated narratives of creation and rejection.

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Brendan Fowler's work spells out "Cancelled."

There are two other threads in the exhibition worth noting. The first is the choice of the artist to cancel an exhibition for artistic reasons. This is primarily shown through the work of Brendan Fowler, whose large assemblage takes up the bulk of one wall and is comprised of shards of Plexiglas, show flyers, ink and paint that spells out "Cancelled." This work was made after he chose to forgo a planned 2008 tour, a decision which he described as "the shedding of baggage," allowing him to move on to a new stage in his artistic work and leave the old behind. Here we're prompted to look at what it means when a vein of work is no longer productive and what needs to happen for an artist to admit that and move on.

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A second idea comes from the inclusion of hundreds of pages of court documents from the [copyright dispute between Richard Prince and Patrick Cariou](#), following Prince's appropriation of images from Cariou's photography book *Yes, Rasta*. Regardless of which side you take on the right of artists to appropriate the imagery of others, the tone and attitude of Prince's court testimony is so thick with a sense of entitlement that it's impossible not to see the ways in which that the case is deeply tied to class politics, and how different the narrative would be if the appropriation had taken place in the other direction. The inclusion of these documents in *Canceled* demonstrates the failure of arguments

that say the arts are both inclusive and merit-based.

OpenOther highlights include samples from the first Exit Art exhibition, *Illegal America* (Exit Art closed its doors on May 19, after 30 years of showing work), work from the poster series “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” by the Guerilla Girls, and Wu Hung’s exhibition catalogue [Exhibiting Experimental Art in China](#).

The show is a bit crowded in the small gallery space at the Center for Book Arts, and there is a great deal to read, but it raises productive questions about the structure of artistic institutions, artistic practice and how to make room for and understand both controversy and failure. As *Canceled* demonstrates, all “failure” in the arts is ultimately productive, if for no other reason than it produces new narratives. It would be interesting to see this taken to another level, looking beyond controversy to more instances where artists have made pieces they believe to have failed, sparking a discussion about what it means for an artwork to succeed.

[Canceled: Alternative Manifestations and Productive Failures](#) is on view at the Center for Book Arts (28 West 27th Street, 3rd floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 30.

Tagged as: [Brendan Fowler](#), [Cariou v Prince](#), [censorship](#), [Center for Book Arts](#), [David Wojnarowicz](#), [Featured](#), [Hans Haacke](#), [Jill Magid](#), [Smithsonian](#)

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