

Ruined Canvas

Brooklyn College ruins artwork from controversial "Plan B" thesis exhibit during removal of materials

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It was only 5 p.m. Saturday evening, but the graduate art students were sprawled on the floor, visibly exhausted by the day. They had held their vigil at this post from 9 a.m., entering one by one, escorted by a security guard, into 206 Roosevelt Extension to inspect the remnants of their artwork and to search for the ones that have seemingly gone missing.

At that precise moment, the other half of students were by the Central Routing Offices in the basement of Roosevelt Hall, doing the same thing. This was the first time the students had been able to view their work since it was seized by Brooklyn College.

The looks on their faces confirmed the worst.

This has been the situation for the 18 Masters of Fine Art students, whose recent thesis exhibit "Plan B," was shut down unexpectedly by the Parks Department two weeks ago for "obscene" material displayed, deeming what it claims is a sexually explicit video, among other works, objectionable. Painfully visible by their demeanor, the students seem to have endured a tiring ordeal in a back and forth attempt to figure out where exactly things

What upsets Kotak most, she said, is the obstinacy of the Brooklyn College administration. "If they had to move it, why didn't they hire professional art handlers to move it?" she said. "They treated our artwork with the same level of respect that you treat your garbage."

Students had scheduled a meeting on the day of the contested move with Professor Roberta Matthews in order to discuss other options for the show. However, Tamas Verszi, one of the students featured in the show, claims that Matthews scheduled a "fake meeting" to divert them from what was taking place at the War Memorial — the unauthorized removal of their property.

According to Megan Pionikowski, another student whose work was exhibited in the show, the students were only informed of the move after hearing scattered rumors, prompting them to station a few students as lookouts at the memorial that morning. Kotak said that at around 8:30 a.m., a half hour before the scheduled meeting, she received a phone call from a student saying that Brooklyn College trucks had arrived at the Plaza. At that time, the other students and professors were in Matthew's office waiting to be heard. Instead, they were welcomed with a cancellation notice, which they feel was a questionable move on Matthews' part. Matthews denied that the meeting was a "diversion" and said that her reason for calling off the session was legitimate.

"It is absolutely not true," said Mat-



IT'S ALL RUINED: Graduate art student holding broken piece of canvas instances."

"It sounds as if the exhibit was shut down because some believed it was offensive," said Hudson. "But the point is that the First Amendment protects offensive, even repugnant expression."

"Also, offensiveness is often in the eyes of the beholder," he added.

Still, even if by legal standards, artwork should not, or rather could not, be considered "obscene" or offensive, the Parks Department thought otherwise. According to Johnston, Brooklyn College had reached a verbal agreement six years ago with Spiegel when the college first acquired the rights to use the space. It was conceded, Johnston said, that when using the space for M.F.A. exhibits, the College would only display "family friendly" works— including overtly sexual pieces. This, coupled with the fact that the public space also serves as a war memorial, led Spiegel to his decision.

According to the New York Times, Spiegel has said that he received a few complaints about some of the pieces and

that it could be "revoked at the discretion of the Parks Department."

Regardless, speaking on behalf of the students, Kotak claimed Siegel has obtained a copy of the permit and no such disclaimer exists. However, according to Warner Johnston, all Parks Department standard permits are similar in the fact that they can be revoked.

"It seems like whatever standard the Parks Department has is an overly vague one that they are applying here," said Megan Fitzgerald, organizer for the Center for Campus Free Speech, located in Chicago, Ill.

According to Floyd Abrams, a renowned First Amendment attorney with the law firm Cahill Gordon & Reindel, in spite of the verbal agreement hammered out between the Parks Department and Brooklyn College which could have given Spiegel the authority to place judgment on the exhibit and ultimately shut it down, the students have grounds for legal action.

"Certainly, First Amendment issues of a very serious nature are raised by the