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Park Officials Shut College Show

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The administration of Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) has done more to promote the arts than any in a generation, but that enthusiasm did not extend to a graduate-student art show that opened this week in a city-owned building near the Brooklyn Bridge. After visiting the exhibition, which featured a penis sculpture, a caged rat and a sexually charged video, the Brooklyn parks commissioner ordered it closed on Thursday and changed the locks to the building.



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Tamas Veszi, left, and Marni Kotak, Brooklyn College fine arts students, in front of the shut War Memorial building.

Warner Johnston, a spokesman for the Parks Department, said the decision was made by Julius Spiegel, the commissioner, who felt the work was not "appropriate for families." In that sense, Mr. Johnston said, it violated an agreement reached six years ago between the city and Brooklyn College for use of the building, a World War II memorial, as a space for the college's art shows.

After discussions yesterday with city officials, the college's provost, Roberta S. Matthews, said that in light of "the public nature of the space as well as its position as an honored war memorial," she had decided to relocate the show, called "Plan B," to the college's campus.

The college has long "supported our students' rights to freedom of artistic expression," she said in a statement.

"We are proud to display our student art here at the college," she said. Ms. Matthews declined to comment further about the issue.

A spokeswoman for the college said the Parks Department had never before raised objections about the nature of artwork in graduate shows.

The latest exhibition, devoted to the thesis projects of 18 Brooklyn College students who are pursuing master's degrees in fine arts, had opened on Wednesday night with the college's president and Ms. Matthews in attendance. But the following afternoon at the building at 195 Cadman Plaza West, a parks superintendent asked the students inside to leave and changed the locks.

"They didn't even ask us to close it or inform us first," said Tamas Veszi, one of the art students, who returned to the building yesterday to post a sign on its tall doors. It read "Plan C," with C as the first letter in "censored."

The students also set up a blog to spread the word about the closing — plancensored.blogspot.com — and announced plans for a rally today in front of the war memorial building to protest the decision.

Marni Kotak, a performance artist whose work in the show featured a mockup of a third-grade classroom with a live rat as class pet, said the students were outraged by the closing. "We were never told that there would be an issue with the kind of content that we showed," she said. "We had no idea that there would be any kind of problem at all."

In addition to the penis sculpture, the works in the show included a video with sexual overtones in which women are dressed as nuns. It also featured, among other things, abstract paintings and watercolors, photographs, video works and installation-type work using air-duct pipes and spheres of unfired clay.

Last year the National Coalition Against Censorship and the College Art Association wrote to the Parks Department to express their opposition to a rule being considered for the city's public art program, which the Parks Department

helps to oversee. The rule was intended to exclude from the program art that demonstrated "a lack of proper respect for public morals or conduct or that includes material that is religious, political or sexual in nature."

Officials from the two organizations wrote that the rule would raise constitutional problems. "Surely a city that is home to world-class cultural institutions and is a major capital of the art world would be an object of ridicule if this rule were implemented," they added. After public hearings last year, the proposed rule was not put into effect.

Ms. Kotak said she and several other artists involved were "adamantly opposed" to moving the Brooklyn College show to the college campus and did not plan to cooperate with the transfer.

"The point of having the show at this space for the last few years was that there really wasn't the right kind of space on campus to do this," she said. "Some of this work is site-specific and is pretty large, like 30 by 30 feet. It's hard to imagine where it's going to be displayed the right way on campus."

For her the only positive development yesterday was that a Parks Department employee allowed her to enter the locked exhibition space to feed the rat in her installation.

"I was getting worried," Ms. Kotak said. "It hadn't had anything to eat in quite a while."