



Brooklyn College art students receive settlement from city

Students had art removed because commissioner considered them inappropriate

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NEW YORK — Eighteen former graduate art students and a teacher at Brooklyn College signed a settlement with the City of New York on May 31, a year after a parks commissioner shut down the students' exhibition at the Brooklyn War Memorial because he considered some of the art pieces inappropriate for families and sexually offensive.

The city awarded \$750 to each student and the teacher, as well as \$42,500 in legal fees, for a total of \$56,750.

More importantly to the students, the Brooklyn parks commissioner, Julius Spiegel, issued a letter of apology in which he acknowledged the First Amendment violation.

"We're hoping that this helps to deter any future actions that violate the rights of students or artists," art student Marni Kotak said of the city's apology.

The exhibition opened in a public building on May 3, 2006, featuring a sculpture of a hand holding a penis and a life-size classroom with a live rat as the class pet. The next day Spiegel ordered the building locked. The following Monday, Brooklyn College sent movers to remove the art without the artists' permission.

The show reopened on May 24 in a different space, but with significant changes from the original exhibition. "Many of the original works were lost or damaged," Kotak said. "Some students chose to show the damaged work, and some made new pieces in response to the censorship."

The students' lawsuit contended that their First Amendment rights were violated when the exhibit was closed and their art was damaged during removal.

"The lesson here is that the government is not the appropriate body to judge the value of art," said Norman Siegel, an attorney for the students, in a telephone interview. "We applaud the students for challenging censorship and upholding the principles of artistic freedom."

By Isaac Arnsdorf, SPLC staff writer