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Pratt Institute
CAA 2011 Conference Session Participation
Beyond Censorship: Art and Ethics

**“The Influence of Social Media on Controversy, Recognition and Censorship in
the Work of
Guillermo Vargas and Numo Ramos”**

Art school confidential: "Pratt Institute's unfair treatment of a conservative student"

Daily News: March 2011

"I do not know how many federal dollars Pratt receives, but they deserve none of them. I might have to do something about that" blog comment."

Inside Higher Ed: March 2011

I would like to start this presentation by telling you how I became interested in participating on this panel.

Two years ago we had an MFA student whose thesis exhibition was decidedly anti-Muslim. Many of the faculty and students were upset about the content of the exhibition and asked that I not allow it to open. The student had given a rather inflammatory interview to *The Brooklyn Paper.com*, titled "Is This the Most Dangerous Artist in Brooklyn?", the Director of Security was worried for the safety of the student and his work, as he believed that blog comments were likely to bring many angry protesters to the exhibition. One of the nicer examples of the bog comments was: Ethan: "I respect the right of Pratt Institute to give a platform to whatever artist they choose, and I respect the right of the Brooklyn Paper to run an ignorant review of tendentious and asinine art without challenging it in any way."

The Fine Art Department did everything to make sure that the student's rights to free expression were upheld, even though we found the images embarrassing and the work itself not overly successful. Although we had more outside visitors to the exhibition than normal, many students and teachers boycotted it and a guard posted outside the gallery door reassured the rest of the campus that there would be no disturbance.

After this student's exhibition concluded, I looked more closely at the blog comments about this student and in my Google search found out that he had sued his undergraduate institution twice because they had not allowed him to exhibit similar work. It is very possible that the graduate committee might have made a different decision on his acceptance if they had been reading these blogs.

Last year at this time, a student with very strong right-wing conservative beliefs was supposed to exhibit with three other seniors. The group was having trouble getting along, not because of the content of his work, but because of this student's inability to compromise and plan a cohesive exhibition with his peers. In an attempt to solve this problem, the senior faculty presented him with an option for a *salon de refusé* type of exhibition—an alternative space where he could design a solo exhibition to present his work in any way that he wanted, rather than cooperating in a group show. This student decided that he was not being treated equally and wrote to a conservative blog that we had censored his work. *Inside Higher Ed* and the *New York Daily News* picked up the blog report and FOX 5 TV News made an attempt to interview me but did not follow through when they realized that the student had never been censored.

During this time I received many emails demanding that I put this student's work back in a show that was actually over a month away from occurring. Some of the emails were fairly vicious and inflammatory.

In recent years it has become clear to me that students will often turn to social media outlets to air grievances that would have likely stayed within the confines of an academic institution in a pre-blogging world. Faculty and administrators have had to become aware of this new dynamic and, for better or worse, try to react accordingly.

This new dynamic has piqued my interest in how social media has affected more established artists as well. I conducted all my research on-line and explored the content of blogs and tweets, with a particular focus on Guillermo Vargas and Numo Ramos. Reading blogger reactions to these artists prompted me to examine the ways in which an artist's work may be perceived to have crossed the boundaries of public sensibility, how current social media affects our ability to reasonably assess the artist's intent, and how community values of censorship can be considered in a global context. I also wanted to examine the role of social media in actually changing the nature of an exhibition.

The first thing I did was Google CRUELTY TO ANIMALS AND CENSORSHIP, and not surprisingly, Guillermo Vargas was the dominant name that appeared. If you are not familiar with Guillermo Vargas, he is a self-taught artist born in Costa Rica in 1975. His work suggests that he enjoys controversy and his exhibitions are usually political and designed to provoke a response from governments. "Eres Lo Que Lees" was part of the *Exposicion No 1* show at the Codice Gallery, which opened in August 2007 and is located in Managua, Nicaragua. In addition to burning 175 pieces of crack cocaine and an ounce of marijuana while the Sandinista anthem played backwards, Vargas tied an emaciated street dog by a three-foot length of rope to the gallery wall with a sign reading "Eres Lo Que Lees" ("You Are What You Read"), written on the wall in dog food. A photo of the dog was posted on the Internet in October 2007, by Dorian Diaz, and immediately went viral when it was reported that the dog starved to death. The blog postings continued through out 2009.

Elav: "Why not tie this motherf*er in a corner and let him die starved?"

Laura: "this is absolutely disgusting. i hope he chains himself up next, he deserves to die if he thinks it is art to forcefully cause another living creature to die"

Although I was familiar with the exhibition I had not remembered that four million people had signed on-line petitions against Vargas. These petitions, and many additional e-mails, demanded that Vargas not be allowed to exhibit this piece in the 2008 biennale in Honduras. Vargas, who reportedly also signed the petition in October of 2007, maintained that none of the viewers who actually attended the exhibition had stepped forward to help the dog. He also stated that "tens of thousands of stray dogs starve and die of illness each year in the streets and no one pays them a second thought."

Juanita Bermúdez, the director of the gallery, stated that fall in *La Prensa* that the animal was fed regularly and was only tied up for three hours, on one day, before it escaped. Snopes.com confirmed this statement. This was also mentioned on the blog About.com on March 30, 2008. The organizers of the Honduran biennial noted that Vargas had not submitted this piece, making the protest pointless. Despite all evidence to the contrary, four million armchair viewing bloggers believed that the dog died; a comparatively miniscule group of people who were physically present at the exhibition witnessed what actually happened. The outpouring of social media and the ensuing petition forever altered the content of "Eres Lo Que Lees," the reputation of the artist and his ability to exhibit his work. At the same time, of course, that same social media presence, at least in this case, provided Guillermo Vargas with a kind notoriety, and cemented his reputation of being an art 'bad boy' in a manner that would have been unlikely before the Internet.

Vargas is, of course, only one example of an artist who has been censored for their work in relation to real or perceived cruelty or exploitation of animals. Numo Ramos, the Brazilian artist and poet, exhibited an installation "White Flag" at the Instituto Brasileiro do Meio in Rio de Janeiro during the 2010 Sao Paulo Biennial. He used live vultures in a mesh cage in what was described on blogs as a 'sinister work.' The installation consisted of three giant conical mounds made of black sand and marble, featuring loudspeakers that emitted samba music." The blogs reports surrounding "White Flag" caused a public outcry and demonstrations in front of the venue. One blog entry stated that Ramos tried "to kill three vultures forcing them to starvation and thirst in the building of the São Paulo Biennial. He put three huge cans of dark paint, in order to drown them, and mirrors, so that they crash their heads as they were flying. He constructed tunnels with black sand, so that they enter without being able to get out, dying inside. And to force them to fly, he launched rockets against them."

Ramos responded in an article in "Folha de São Paulo," on September 10, 2010: "As in nightmares or lynchings, it is not possible to answer the charges in this order, which circulated on the internet and word of mouth with an insatiable force during the last three weeks, creating a breeding ground for violence and intimidation. As a result, in the midst of the Biennial, among protests asking to arrest me, my work was attacked by a graffiti painter, who evaded safety measures, tore the screen protecting the animals and damaged one of the sand sculptures. We were surrounded, my wife and I, by environmentalists, that insulted us and yelled across the car window, their mouths in slow

motion, “f-e-e-d-t-h-e-m” -which, of course, had already been done that day.

The vultures had been born in captivity, were living in a much larger cage than they were used to and were fed fresh meat every morning. They were, in fact, receiving better treatment than they had before intervention by Mr. Ramos. After three weeks of protests the work was withdrawn from the Instituto and Mr. Ramos stated that this was a "criminalization of his work" and an "abduction of meaning."

Another artist of note, Algerian Adel Abdessemed's media exhibit "Don't Trust Me," was scheduled to open March 26, 2008 at the San Francisco Art Institute, showing horses and other animals as they are slaughtered for consumption in Mexico. Protests and death threats caused the exhibit to be cancelled five days after opening day.

San Francisco Art Institute President Chris Bratton announced on March 31, 2008 that the “exhibition had become the subject of an orchestrated campaign by a number of animal rights groups, including Animal Liberation Front, In Defense of Animals and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals... leading to explicit death threats and threats of sexual assault- as well as racial, religious, and homophobic slurs- against SFAI staff members and their families.” Although there were a number of blogs posted in favor of the right of the artist to show his work, the videos were also described on blogs as a snuff film in *Forward Retreat.wordpress.com* on March 31, 2008 and on *Art News Blog*. Abdessemed's work was a principal factor in the creation of the Humanitarian Art Ordinance, written by a San Francisco attorney Christine Garcia and passed in March 2009 by the Greater Valley Glen Council in Southern California. The ordinance states that artwork should be deemed illegal when the artist has caused, created or contributed to the crime of animal abuse for the purpose of his or her creation of the media or exhibit.

However, Abdessemed was not prevented from exhibiting "Don't Trust Me" at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York in May 2009. After seeing the exhibition, critic Jerry Saltz wrote on Facebook: "At 12:47 p.m. I posted the following comment, made by my friend, New York *Times* critic Ken Johnson: 'I think that Adel Abdessemed's video of animals fighting and killing each other (at the David Zwirner gallery), is the most appalling and evil work of art I have ever seen. Michael Vick went to prison for far less. Why so little outrage?' Within minutes scores of comments poured in, almost all of them saying that this work was 'evil', 'despicable', '100 percent cruel', and that this piece represented 'the *faux* avant-garde bullshit that has become the New York art world.' I could not find evidence that Adel Abdessemed continued to exhibit "Don't Trust Me" although he has continued working on many different projects, none as containing the same subject matter.

The killing and torturing of animals for art is not a new phenomenon. In May 1968 Ralph Ortiz became famous for his performances involving the killing of chickens and the smashing of pianos. He was even invited to smash a piano and talk about the chicken killings on the Johnny Carson show. Ortiz set up the performance at the Judson Gallery in Los Angeles in 1967, a year after he had participated in the "Destruction of Art Symposium" in London.

For the Judson performance he strung up two live chickens in trees, but before this performance could actually take place two audience members rescued the birds and released them as reported by Jill Johnston in the Village Voice on March 28, 1968 and the majority of the public never realized that the exhibition existed, or that Ortiz had done this before. The difference between Ortiz and Vargas and the others is the advent of social media. Without the easy ability to share information and opinions provided by the Internet, Ralph Ortiz enjoyed only a brief moment of fame in relation to his perceived cruelty to animals and there were no organized media protests.

Although there was public reaction to the 1960's and 70's artist's performances and installations, the world that knew about them, paid attention, or even cared was small and select. A telling example of the power of blogs, is the recent controversy caused by a blog report about a video Tom Otterness made 34 years ago. Otterness, described in media reports on the Wichita State University site as 'one of the most family and community friendly artists' was commissioned to create a sculpture to be placed near the University's Ulrich Museum. The controversy surfaced in spring 2007, when a candidate for Student Government Association president at the school posted a blog and questioned the use of \$150,000 in student funds to pay part of the commission for a new campus sculpture by an artist who had shot an adopted dog to death in 1977 as part of a video art piece called "Shot Dog Film." Without social media attention during the 1970s, controversy over the "Shot Dog Film" had been relatively minimal and had been all but forgotten over the span of the artist's career. After much controversy, the 20 ft. bronze millipede was installed but in September 2011, Otterness, who had subsequently been awarded a \$750,000 contract for an art project in San Francisco called "Central Subway" had the contract rescinded. The San Francisco Arts Commission claimed to be unaware of "Shot Dog Film" when they awarded the contract and the mayor of San Francisco called "Shot Dog Film" "deeply disturbing"

Otterness has issued this statement: "In 1977, I was a young artist having a very rough time. I had anger at myself and at the world. What I did was symbolic of how I was feeling internally and it is something I would never do today."

Otterness made this video before the advent of the web, and in my opinion, from the "family friendly" nature of the work produced afterward, might have been privately atoning for the video for the last 30 years. The comments on the blog, however, have forever changed his career and the prospect of ever receiving another public commission is decidedly diminished. As often happens in our media saturated world, the artist has come to be defined only by his single most shocking act, rather than the totality of his oeuvre.

The advent of social media has raised many questions because it is becoming increasingly clear that perception might be more important than reality, and that facts may no longer be of paramount importance. Are the moral/ethical standards that we apply to the treatment of animals relative or absolute? How do we judge whether work we haven't personally viewed requires moral outrage? Should each person determine for himself or herself what behavior is moral or ethical? How are decisions swayed by crowd

behavior? Should we be making cultural decisions and inflicting these judgments on other cultures? Should art only be judged according to the culture, the time in history, the individual and the context in which the art is done?

Above all, how do we react to judgments made by large groups of people who have not actually experienced the art but are reacting to what they read on a blog or a tweet? The recognition of the importance of free expression advocacy by most cultural groups and institutions is central to the survival of the arts. Where do we draw the line on freedom of expression and how social media is able to affect public opinion and ethical decision-making?

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