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Book Review: Outrage: Art, Controversy, and Society, Richard Howells, Andreea Deciu Ritivoi and Judith Schachter (eds)

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***OUTRAGE: ART, CONTROVERSY, AND SOCIETY*, RICHARD HOWELLS, ANDREEA
DECIU RITIVOI AND JUDITH SCHACHTER (EDS)**

New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2012), 339 pp.,

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One thing that seems clear about any controversy over art—especially if you are caught in it—is that it *is* a controversy. That is how outrage works. Anyone who disagrees with you must be a cynic or a dupe. Relativism be damned.

Despite how controversy feels, though, *Outrage* argues the opposite: far from inhering in the object, controversy flows from context. Thus, about halfway through its introduction, the book's editors write that 'art objects in themselves cannot be controversial; we need people to make them so'. Following from this, they continue, 'What we see so often played out in the media is therefore not so much an aesthetic as a power play' comprising headline-hungry journalists, prominent, reliably inflammatory interviewees and competing interests. '[C]ulture', Howell, Ritivoi and Schacter therefore conclude, 'is not peripheral to an understanding of society but is fundamental to it'. (5) Plenty of evidence in this book supports this conclusion. Still, the idea that controversy depends more on context than on the disputed object is hard to grasp, given how completely otherwise it feels in the storm's midst. And this slipperiness makes this book frustrating, limited and valuable in a way that symptomatizes the topic's complexity.

Consider the face-off that occurred in 1999, when Chris Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* appeared at the Brooklyn Museum as part of the 'Sensation' exhibition. Rudy Guiliani, then mayor of New York, found Ofili's use of elephant dung in the image self-evidently sacrilegious, unworthy of taxpayer support. For Arnold Lehman, at that time the Brooklyn Museum's director, Guiliani's attacks indisputably came from a mayor convinced that he operated above the law—specifically, above the American Constitution's First Amendment. Neither party—especially the mayor—likely pondered their passion's roots in their social context.

Yet as Howells emphasizes in his chapter of this volume, context clearly had much to do with the explosion around Ofili's painting. When 'Sensation' appeared in London two years before its display in Brooklyn, Ofili's image attracted little attention. However, an uproar erupted around Marcus Harvey's painting *Mrya*, a likeness of child murderess Myra Hindley, which in turn attracted little notice in the U.S.

Nor is this the only case of controversy clearly depending on context. For example, Howells also looks at the explosions in Britain around D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, published in 1928 in France and Italy but unavailable in England until 1959. At that point, Penguin printed 200,000 copies to defy the then newly-passed *Obscene Publications Act*. The outcome's predictability—clueless prosecutor patronizes jury; acquittal and massive sales ensue—should not obscure Howells' point: 'Not a word of Lawrence's 1928 publication had changed in 30 years (the Penguin edition was proudly unexpurgated), but social attitudes had', he

writes. 'As [Roger] Fry would have said, the controversy was therefore social rather than aesthetic'. (22)

Nowhere is this position's difficulty clearer than in examples involving past dictatorships, as Carrie L. Ruiz shows regarding Francoist monuments in today's Spain. Ruiz starts from Spain's transition to democracy following the death of long-time dictator Francisco Franco Bahamonde in 1975. Franco had named Juan Carlos I, Spain's king, as his successor. However, upon his enthronement, Juan Carlos initiated a transition to democracy that, while smooth, came with a price: amnesty for Francoist collaborators. There were, Ruiz says, 'no hearings, no truth commissions, and no formal process of reconciliation'. (101) It also meant, according to Ruiz, 'a 30-some-year repression of the past' resulting in 'a passivity toward all fascist visual representations in public spaces'. (101-102)

However, in 2007 the then-Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero passed the *Historical Memory Law* that, among other things, Ruiz writes, calls for 'the removal of all shields, insignias, plaques, and commemorative elements of the civil war or dictatorship era from public spaces'. (102) Public and political opinion immediately fell into three camps: that Zapatero was right; that Zapatero was wrong because such reminders help to keep us vigilant against fascism's return; and that Zapatero was wrong because Franco was good for the country. Despite this range, the name-calling started quickly, as Ruiz shows in her analysis of the controversy around one of the works that prompted the *Historical Memory Law*, José Capuz' massive bronze of Franco, in Madrid. The mayor, Alberto Ruiz Gallardón, had been

under pressure to remove the statue, but when he waffled, the opposition accused him of currying favour with conservative voters.

The accusation's plausibility is beside the point. What matters is that the opposition accused the mayor of bad faith, rather than attacking his argument—because that is how these things go. The more heated the moment, the more compelling the belief that our opponents are stupid, insincere or both. Yet, as with Ofili and Lawrence, context plays a role here, not only in the statue's presence but also in its absence, since the statue's removal resulted in a court case that carried on for four years. Yet we could easily imagine a situation in which the absence of a fascist moment—most obviously, if it had not been there to begin with—would have raised no comment.

It takes a village, in other words, to make a controversial artwork. In this day and age, no one will be astonished by such an argument, given how freely we bandy about claims that this or that is socially constructed (even if, as Ian Hacking shows, much of the time we are not clear what that means). Much harder is accepting its implication: when the refusal of others to acknowledge that we are right (i.e. that Ofili or Harvey are or are not offensive; that Damian Hirst is or is not a fraud) infuriates us, our fury derives less from our rectitude than from our relation to our historical moment. Artistic controversies differ not in whether they are fundamentally social, but in whether their social bases are apparent.

A large part of controversial art's value exists in these moments of truculence, which urge one side or the other to re-assess its position. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* showed that British expectations had changed, not only in terms of what literary

merit might be, but also of who (aesthetically and legally) could judge that merit. And it would be nice (if unlikely) to think that the argument around Capuz' statue of Franco led the disputants to consider that their opponents might be sincere.

The interesting and sticky part of this book, though, is that it is not quite sure what it wants to be. In many ways, its quasi-sociological bent recalls such classic books from the 1980s as Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* and Janet Wolff's *The Social Production of Art*. However, making this approach matter is harder than it might sound.

The signal example of this difficulty is Peter A. Cramer's chapter on the print media's response to the Oflin controversy. This is an area of expertise for Cramer, who has published a book on *Controversy as News Discourse*, and whose contribution here dissects who participated in the news discourse and how frequently, as well as trying to weight the impact of their contributions. Ultimately, though, Cramer's discussion seems both self-evident and cyclical: near the end, he says that a good way to get yourself quoted is to be lively, controversial and well-known (90), but he already has suggested that 'journalists and editors decide what counts as news and who is authorized to appear on the page'. (75)

Yet it is hard to see what Cramer could do differently without following many of his fellow contributors down the road of not so much inspecting controversy as defending it, in the manner of such relatively recent books as John Walker's *Art & Outrage*, Caroline Levine's *Provoking Democracy* and the special pleading for art's social role in Jean-Paul Martinon's edited volume *The Curatorial*. Controversial art perhaps—even probably—expands our horizons. But that does not mean public

discourse would falter without it, despite what Manu Samriti Chander says in his essay here on the persistence of controversy. In the bigger picture, the controversies around scientific freedom dwarf those regarding the arts. Robert Mapplethorpe and Richard Serra (who appear in *Outrage*); Damien Hirst and Andres Serrano (who do not)—none of their scandals come close to the firestorms touched off by global heating, GMO food or stem cell research (each of which is the subject of some excellent discussion in the anthology *Scientific Freedom* [2012]). But bringing art and science into contact, seeing how they can be mutually supportive—seeing, for example, their common cause around the right to be useless in a world hell-bent on maximizing instrumentalization—requires a conjunctural analysis that *Outrage* lacks, for all its talk of sociological methods and contextual awareness.

No doubt less unevenness would make *Outrage* more enjoyable, more satisfying. But I'm not sure that enjoyment and satisfaction are the point. As Chander and Albrecht Funk both suggest in this volume's concluding essays, displeasure and dissatisfaction do a much better job of encouraging us to hover outside ourselves, to stretch toward that impossible Archimedean apex from which we can see ourselves in our true relation to the world.

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