

## Arts&LEISURE



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Notice the red and blue carpets, the television sets placed back to back: It's "Your Land/My Land," a Jonathan Horowitz installation at the Contemporary Art Museum in Raleigh, N.C.

# Voting Against Ruffled Feathers

**American Museums Tend to Tiptoe Around Politics And Even The Political Process**

By RANDY KENNEDY

The Contemporary Art Museum here occupies a refurbished produce warehouse at the edge of downtown, near an auto-machine shop and a denim company, and late on weeknights the neighborhood is usually about as quiet as a library. But just after 10 on a recent Tuesday night the museum's lights spilled onto the sidewalk, and inside almost two dozen people were gathered to watch the final debate between President Obama and Mitt Romney.

Sitting cross-legged and on stools, they composed an almost comic portrait of a two-party electorate, particularly North Carolina's version: a little more than half

sat on a bright red carpet, watched over by a large portrait of a smiling Mr. Romney, while the others sat on an adjoining blue carpet precisely the same size, flanked by a portrait of the president. Between the carpets, two back-to-back televisions, one usually tuned to Fox News and the other to CNN — you can guess which direction each television faced — beamed out the foreign-policy-focused confrontation between the candidates.

Besides these meager elements the huge gallery contained nothing, except for a computer and, on the windows, the words "Your Land/My Land," the name of the rigorously neutral, rigidly minimalist installation by the New York artist Jonathan Horowitz that occasioned the gathering.

Beginning this summer Mr. Horowitz engaged in negotiations to place identical installations inside seven contemporary-art museums around the country during the prelude to the election, in solidly red states (Texas, Utah, Georgia), in solidly blue ones (New York, California) and in those like North Carolina and Missouri that have straddled the divide. Over the last few weeks — as museumgoers have communed in the spaces or sometimes just stood at their edges, wondering if it was O.K. to walk on the art — the installations have become a strange

mélange of sculpture, town-hall-debate stage, interactive artwork and glorified television lounge.

While the works have not gotten much media attention in the places where they're being seen, they have succeeded in raising a lot of questions among museumgoers. These include the familiar: Is this art? Is it good art? Is it really the best use of a huge amount of museum space?

The more important questions, though, hover outside the institutions and go directly to art's role in America at a time when contemporary art feels increasingly disconnected from the culture at large, even as the art business and museum world have never been bigger: Should public museums be places where political argument happens? Why is this so rarely the case, especially when compared with politically engaged programming in museums in Europe, Mexico, South America and even parts of the Middle East?

After periods when many museums brought political questions to the fore — during the Vietnam War and at the height of the AIDS crisis — the pendulum has swung the other way over the last decade and a half. There are exceptions, even among prominent museums. There are thriving alternative art spaces that have never lost sight of the political. And there is a new generation of artists who aggressively blur the line between activist and artist, pushing against the commercial imperatives of the gallery world.

But for many artists, curators and writers this period of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Obama presidency has shown the lack of political content — what the art blogger Tyler Green recently described as museums' retreat into “an apolitical bunker” — in sharp relief.

Elysia Borowy-Reeder, the executive director of the Contemporary Art Museum in Raleigh, which opened a year and a half ago, said she was drawn to the election installation mostly because, in contemporary art's embrace of nearly every other aspect of life and culture, the absence of the political felt artificial.

“I was living in Chicago in 2008,” she said, “and if you went in the galleries or the art school world or into museums, you didn't know that an election was happening. It was this groundbreaking, historic event. It was something that really mattered. And four years later I still don't see much art that deals with the political.”

Mr. Horowitz, whose work over the last 15 years has dealt with political and cultural questions in stark and often disconcertingly open-ended ways, created a piece similar to the “Your Land/My Land” installation at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in the West Village in 2008. He said he wanted to try to move the idea into the museum world across the country this year because he believed — in a way that he admits might be wistful or nostalgic — that museums should play a more important civic role in American society, beyond their educational mission.

“I certainly think that museums can play a role in political discourse, and they have in the past more so than they do today,” said Mr. Horowitz, whose installation will remain up through, and in some cases past, Election Day.



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The museum occupies a refurbished produce warehouse at the edge of downtown Raleigh.

“I wouldn't say that museums have a moral obligation to engage in political discourse any more than artists have a moral obligation to make work that does. I will say, though, that hermetic art about art is generally not of that much interest to me, and this seems to be the direction that art is trending.”

He added: “I also hope that the work bridges a little the gulf that exists between museums and the world outside of them. When I was growing up, there was a poster of Edward Hicks's ‘The Peaceable Kingdom’ that hung in my family's dining room. Below the image a caption read, ‘The Brooklyn Museum Is for Everybody.’ That message has always stuck with me.”

Whether a bare-bones idealized electoral forum created by a liberal New York artist (and Obama supporter) is the kind of art that helps make museums a place for everyone is, of course, an open question. Curators and administrators at the Raleigh museum, whose board includes Democrats and Republicans, said that connecting with conservatives to encourage them to visit and engage with the installation had not been particularly successful. “We really tried,” said Daniel Moskop, a board member.

On the night I visited, the sparse crowd (it had been larger for the previous debate, Ms. Borowy-Reeder said) watched quietly, with some groans or guffaws, and few people stayed to talk after the debate. It also turned out that many of the people sitting on the red-carpet side, like Christina Serafino and her friend Leilani Bissell were actually Democrats. “We just kind of sat wherever,” Ms. Serafino, 29, said. But she added: “It was nice watching at a museum instead of a bar or your living room or somewhere. You go into a museum with an open mind, or you're supposed to, and that's how you should go to vote too.”

The question of why contemporary-art museums too often tiptoe around even such hot-button-less political work is more complicated. Partly it is a legacy of the '80s and '90s culture wars that threatened public funds for the visual arts and that continue to make many institutions wary of offending any constituencies. (Battles of the Jesse Helms variety have gone away, but the Smithsonian Institution's removal of a provocative David Wojnarowicz video from a National Portrait Gallery show in 2010 was a



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Views above at the “Your Land/My Land” installation at the Contemporary Art Museum in Raleigh, N.C., where museumgoers watched the presidential debates. The work, by Jonathan Horowitz, was also presented in several other museums across the country.

reminder that such tensions still lie just below the surface.) It is also partly a practical concern among museums about the gate — about political art being rejected by American museumgoers as one-dimensional, as visually dull, as too divisive or as all of the above.

It may, however, also speak more fundamentally to the role of the artist in American society in the 21st century, a role whose political authority has eroded along with that of novelists, poets and philosophers. “The figure of the artist can still be heroic, still an outsider and still transgressive in Europe and many other parts of the world, whereas that’s seems less and less the case here,” said Negar Azimi, a writer and editor at *Bidoun*, a New York arts and culture magazine, who examined the contradictions of international political art in an article in *Frieze* magazine last year.

Perhaps as a result, over the last decade or more many artists with strong political convictions have found it that much more difficult to express them in the context of a museum, where conventions and expectations can leave such work feeling toothless.

Even the kind of deft politically oriented art staged by artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose best-known pieces consisted simply of providing good, free meals in SoHo galleries and in museums, has sometimes come to be seen as a gesture already “digested by the conditions of power,” as Nato Thompson, a curator for the public art organization Creative Time, wrote in “Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art From 1991-2011.”

So artists like Paul Chan, Laurie Jo Reynolds and Theaster Gates — who operate in a growing middle ground between art and activism — end up working much more often outside the walls of the art world, in neighborhoods, through the Web, in long-term projects within activist circles.

Carin Kuoni, the director of the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School in Manhattan, said she sees a fundamental paradox even for those American museums that try to engage politically. Unlike many European museums, for example, whose origins lie in royal collections and presentations of colonialist treasure, museums in America developed in tandem with the civic growth of the country. (Francis Henry Taylor, a director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 1940s and ‘50s, said museums should aim to be no less than “the midwife of democracy.”) Because of this, there has always been an expectation that museums, as educators more than anything else, must remain above, even far above, the fray.

“In other words, structure and history account for U.S. museum programs that, by and large, address a very broad public,” Ms. Kuoni said. “And this explains why they find explicit political pronouncements so difficult to make.” She added, however, that several American museums, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, have begun finding ways in recent years to turn toward political programming, often of a much more strident nature than Mr. Horowitz’s.

From one perspective his installation can seem to be a devious commentary on the very bind American museums face — not a work that tries to bring genuine political debate into the halls of the art world but one that, through its utter neutrality and reductiveness, shows the near impossibility of the attempt.

In an interview several weeks ago as the locations for the work were being chosen, he insisted that this was not his intention and that he believes it is possible for the institutional art world to help people think more critically about the country’s political future.

“I’m not that cynical,” he said. “I do really think it matters which side wins this election. There’s no hidden metaphor here. The show is the election.”



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