



DECEMBER 7, 2012, 5:02 PM

Artist Expulsed From Art Basel Miami Beach for Peaceful Anti-Homelessness Demonstration [UPDATEDx2]



I've been at [Art Basel Miami Beach](#) for two full days now, which is just about enough. Passing by Art Positions for a final go-round, I noticed an older African-American man in a ball cap, sitting by himself on the wavy green fake park installation, quietly reading a book. The area was packed, mainly with teenagers, but nobody seemed to be paying him much mind. He stood out mainly because he was sitting with three small cardboard signs that read,

respectively, “Art Needs a Home,” “Homelessness Is a Condition Not a Disease,” and “Hungry Not Starving.”

My colleague Julia and I stopped to talk to him, to find out if he was an artist. He didn’t seem to want to talk at first; “I’m just reading and enjoying the show like anyone else.” But when I said I was interested in the message of his signs, he began to tell me a story that sounded like a parable.

He said he was from Atlanta, and that he lived at a studio at the top of a building. The view was so good, he said, that he didn’t need a television. He said that from his windows, he could see into a small park, and that homeless people slept there at night. There was also some public art, and men and women who lived in the street would defecate behind it sometimes. People couldn’t see this from the street, he said, but he could see it, from his room. He said the art was made for the Atlanta Olympics, and that the folk artists who made it were all dead now. But he thought that they wouldn’t have minded, and that maybe they even would have appreciated people getting some use out of their art.

“So what do you do?” he asked me, coming to an end. “What does an artist do about problems like that?”

Juxtaposed with the fairs, Miami’s large homeless population is always one of the most unnerving things about ABMB. And I was just about to tell the man that I was from New York, and that I had just been reading about how in New York we broke a record for the number of kids sleeping in shelters: 20,000 in one night. Mayor Bloomberg recently cut subsidies for housing to low-income families, and this has forced more families onto the street.

But right then, a policeman appeared. He was big and threatening and he barked, “Sir, I need to talk to you right now. I need you to get up and come with me.” The man we had been talking with asked why. “Come with me sir. You’re coming with me right now.”



The cop — his name was Lieutenant Carulo — didn't ask the man what he was doing, or even ask him to put away his signs. He just cut straight to threatening him if he didn't come with him immediately, like he had stolen something. I told the lieutenant that we were having a conversation, and that this man was a visitor like anyone else anyway. The cop told us to stay out of it.

The man left very peacefully, picking up his stuff to follow the policeman. I got his business card. His name is F. Geoffrey Johnson, and he describes himself as a poet and artist. If you go to his website, SmellsISee.com, you find the following artists statement:

As a visual artist and poet, I mine stories that have been buried or left to die. I raise questions that need attention. I shine light on shadows and attempt to bring voice to the voiceless.

I am constantly exploring new means of expressing the “smells i see”. By re-purposing e-waste and other objects in my assemblage artworks, that may have found their way into landfills and toxic dumps, both nationally and internationally and among our world’s poorest citizens, these elements now may find their way into museums to be viewed by some of our world’s wealthiest citizens.

The Purpose of My Work

1. To re-purpose environmental waste that is globally endangering humanity, especially the youth of many impoverished African, Asian and European countries.
2. I believe in documenting my time on this earth through art and the art of the story. I rely on metaphor as a means of presenting visual art as literature. As a poet I firmly believe in the story behind my art and the power derived from leaving a visual history.
3. I hope to contribute additional voice and attention to stories that may get lost in the myriad of stories presented as popular culture; stories that receive much less media attention than less controversial news. My intent is to add to the dialogue that may bring about creative solutions to problems of conscience that we encounter as human beings.”

I told Lieutenant Carulo that I was a journalist. “Fine,” he said. “You can write a nice little story about this.”

— *Ben Davis*

UPDATE, 5PM: We followed up with Johnson to see what happened after he was escorted out by the policeman. “They said I was trespassing,” he told us. “When I showed them my ticket, they said I was displaying art.” Apparently, Johnson had been sitting in the same spot with the same signs all day yesterday without incident. “A dealer walked up to me and asked if I was selling art, but I explained I wasn’t selling anything. There was no problem at all.” Lieutenant Carulo and a staff member for Art Basel Miami Beach informed Johnson that if he were to return to the fair, he would be arrested, he said. “I guess they thought my expression was great art, and they didn’t want that in the fair,” he quipped. “I’m going to go to other shows to enjoy Miami as best I can, but I’m not going to do what I was doing anymore.”

— *Julia Halperin*

UPDATE 2, 7PM: Reached for comment, the management of Art Basel Miami Beach made this statement about the incident:

Art Basel supports artistic expression and respects the right to protest, but does not allow demonstrations, or artists' performances that are not part of exhibiting galleries' programs within the halls. The member of the public therefore was asked to pack away his signs and, as he was not prepared to do so, he was eventually asked to leave.

(Photo by Ben Davis.)