

Shocked

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 15, 1999](#) issue

I almost got through the '90s without mentioning contemporary art controversies. You did not read anything here about Piss Christ and Elephant Dung Mary or the people who make their livelihood off the brouhaha over such images—religious "antidefamation" interests, lawyers, third-rate artists, and public officials who express outrage. But now I feel compelled to comment.

Here's why: The artist at the center of the most recent of these controversies has told us how to define the decade. Until now we had not known what the '90s were about. Mention the '20s or the '30s or the '60s and something comes to mind. But the '90s were a blank until Jef Bourgeois came along. He is an artist who is trying to be noticed—and succeeding in getting noticed—by having a big hand in a show that the Detroit Institute of Arts shut down after exhibiting it for only two days.

The exhibit includes a jar of urine supposedly used by Piss Christ artist Andres Serrano for his picture of a submerged cross (but it isn't; speak of authenticity!), a video purportedly of Tracey Emin taking a shower while menstruating (but the woman in the video isn't Emin), a toy Jesus wearing a condom (attributed to Chris Ofili of Elephant Dung Mary fame, but it isn't really by him), plus a brazil nut accompanied by a racial epithet and a pile of human excrement (both probably authentic).

The museum's new director Graham W. J. Beal, who had been unaware of what the exhibit would contain, decided to close it. "Censorship!" responded Bourgeois and Kary L. Moss, executive director of the ACLU in Michigan. The word "knee-jerk" seems to have been invented for them. According to Moss, "The essence of modern art in general is to allow people to make up their own mind about art." To which Bourgeois adds, "It is push-your-button art, it is aggressive art, but it is art." Then comes the definition: "You can't ignore [this art]. The '90s is about shock."

But the arts shocked long before this shock decade. Bosch, Rembrandt, Monet, Greek sculptors all shocked. The real issues are: shock how, and about what? Moss, Bourgeois and company think the way to shock is by heaping up elephant dung,

urine, excrement, condoms and the like in museums. But such things have become banal. Stifle a yawn.

If the '90s is the shock decade, let artists startle us with efforts to treat the human body, the human story, with a measure of dignity. Let them transcend the boundaries of what confronts us every day in rest rooms and emergency rooms. Let them refuse to allow the cry "censorship" to inspire or define them.