

Bill Donohue, art promoter

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As is so often

the case in these situations, the only part of the National Portrait Gallery's show "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture" that I have seen is the part dubbed "offensive" and removed from the exhibition thanks to the Catholic League's William Donohue and a few congressional representatives. It is 11 seconds of a four-minute video by late artist David Wojnarowicz, and it's now available [all over the Internet](#)--often not the whole video but just the offending 11 seconds.

[According to Philip Kennicott](#), the clip I have seen is "culled from a few minutes of video, itself culled from an unfinished work that was not among Wojnarowicz's best." It depicts ants crawling over an apparently discarded crucifix--and like most meaningful art, it is open to a number of interpretations, some sacrilegious and some even devout, as S. Brent Plate [argues](#).

To some on the

National Portrait Gallery's advisory board--such as former commissioner James Bartlett, who resigned over the controversy--the problem is letting Congress (or in this case a few outraged senior members of Congress) decide which art

gets displayed in museums. This is what curators do, and when they do it, they consider a wide range of circumstances and realities, including the delicate issue of how the public will respond. To turn this process over to political manipulation is bad for public discourse, bad for art and bad for museums--it is a lose-lose-lose.

The show in question is the first ever at the National Portrait Gallery on the theme of gay, lesbian and transgender life. Is the controversy over the 11 seconds a red herring? Is the real issue what retired Episcopal bishop Clark Grew [calls](#) "an ongoing and increasingly nasty gay-lesbian-transgender-bashing that is so prevalent with some members of Congress"? Is religion or sexuality--or once again the conjunction of religion and sexuality--at the heart of the dispute?

This is difficult to know since the video was quickly removed by the Smithsonian and called a "distraction," yet the effects reverberate as artists and curators cry foul and decision makers go into hiding. I am struck by the irony that once again, the Catholic League makes famous the very piece of art they claim to want banished. Maybe they are actually working for the artists.