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DESIGNATED AREAS HIGHER

ROGER SIMON

Some Notes for Audiences on the Fine Art of Criticizing Artists

I am declaring this and all future columns to be works of art. That makes them free from criticism.

It means I no longer will have to spend time being polite to readers who ask: "What did you mean when you wrote . . .?"

Now, I will simply say: "I produce art, you simple-minded philistines! Art does not have to be defended! Art simply is!"

And they will have to shut up. Because ordinary people are not allowed to criticize art.

An office building in suburban Washington recently erected an 18-foot "plaster and aluminum assemblage" in its lobby. The "assemblage" was a bunch of dummies on a ladder.

There was an older dummy in a

business suit at the top of the ladder and a dummy dressed like a mailman at the bottom of the ladder. In between were dummies of a woman, a black man and a white man.

Many of the tenants in the building did not like this art. Ordinarily their criticism would have been dismissed as meaningless. But some of them apparently threatened to take their business elsewhere. And so the building owners decided to remove the art.

"It is a bottom-line decision," the owners admitted. "Very much so."

Naturally, the art community was outraged. How dare ordinary people influence decisions about art! And the artist was very upset.

" . . . I feel the people are being deprived of an important work of

art that deals with social commentary," he said. "Behind the humor is also the reality of the imbalance of the ethnic and gender composition in the great majority of corporations."

Ohhhhhhh, now I get it. Before I thought it was a bunch of dummies on a ladder. But there is one thing I have never understood about such explanations: Since the artist doesn't get to stand by the work and whisper the meaning to everyone who comes by, what's the purpose of the explanation?

And how does such art get sold in the first place? Well, the first rule is to make the art very, very big. Few people have room for 18-foot high sculptures in their living rooms. So this art is made expressly for corporate lobbies and

plazas.

The owners of that office building outside Washington say they view "art as an investment and a capital expenditure." In other words, they don't care what the hell it looks like as long as it takes up enough lobby space and increases in value.

I am reasonably sure you could bring them an 18-foot high stack of bronzed cow pies, tell them it is sure to go up in value and get 20 or 30 grand for your efforts. (No fair trying it; I thought of it first.)

And really big corporations like really big art. All over America you can see the twisted girders, dangling steel plates and painted rocks. Some are 30 and 40 and 50 feet high.

Their sheer size discourages

criticism. "Go ahead and laugh at me," they seem to say. "I weigh 100 tons and cost a fortune. Laugh and I will crush you."

You can drive around the downtown of any city and see examples of this. If your kid brought such things home from fourth grade art class, you'd rush him to the school psychologist. But in a plaza, where they assault the public daily, they are free from attack.

And government, being the biggest corporation, buys the biggest art. What's that? You don't like some of these gigantic slabs of steel? Hey, you must be a real goon. And nobody cares if your tax

dollars paid for them. Wise up and shut up.

Cities like to buy art to announce they have arrived. Some years ago, Chicago bought a sculpture from Pablo Picasso for its civic center. It weighed 135 tons, stood 50 feet high and cost \$300,000. It looked like a chimpanzee pressed up against a plate glass window.

But nobody could say so. Not about a Picasso! And so all the city fathers had to pretend to like it.

Just like you have to pretend to like this column. I will not listen to one word of criticism about it. I would like to, but I just can't.

It's art.