

VIEWPOINT: An Art Museum Story that has Nothing to do with Art

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by Joan Altabe

Like most relationship breakups, [the split](#) between the city of North Miami and the MOCA board of trustees is not just about one thing. Contentions on both sides seem so balled up that unraveling them is like trying to straighten out cooked spaghetti.

At first, you think the dispute can be narrowed to the inherent right of a city paying staff salaries at a museum to pick the staff. The city of North Miami picked a new director. Museum board members didn't like the choice and they walked.

Dig deeper, though, and entitlements don't register as the tipping point. A slant on the rift from the new city-appointed MOCA director Babacar M'Bow suggests that the underlying cause may be a matter of race and class. And, unfairly or not, such matters are the basis of a particularly nasty climate in the U.S. at the moment - particularly evident in the lather about immigration.

Tucked into his many statements to the [Miami New Times](#), M'Bow, a native of Senegal and managing editor of the *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora*, was his throwaway line about his annual salary being "way less than the annual salary of the previous director," Alex Gartenfeld.

But it was the way M'Bow railed against the museum board's unilateral decision-making that was especially telling: "Nothing is available today for citizens' information as to how their tax dollars were spent. The city just trusted (the board) to do the best for our citizens. A tiny minority, because of its wealth, ethnicity, and location, ended up believing that it is not subject to rules..."

The "citizens" M'Bow is referring to are the near 60 percent African Americans in North Miami.

Racial issues are not new to museum politics. In [Thomas Hoving's memoir](#) of his tenure as director at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), he told of trying to change the membership of the board of trustees to make it more racially mixed board at a City Council meeting. (Like MOCA, the Met is city-owned).

When his proposed candidate, Arnold Johnson, was asked how he would solve the poverty and violence in black neighborhoods. Johnson said that being black didn't give him special insight. "I'm not poor or violent." Hoving noted that Johnson's effort to distance himself from his fellow blacks probably gave him the election to the board.

Racial divisiveness raised its ugly head again when Hoving mounted a show of black artists,

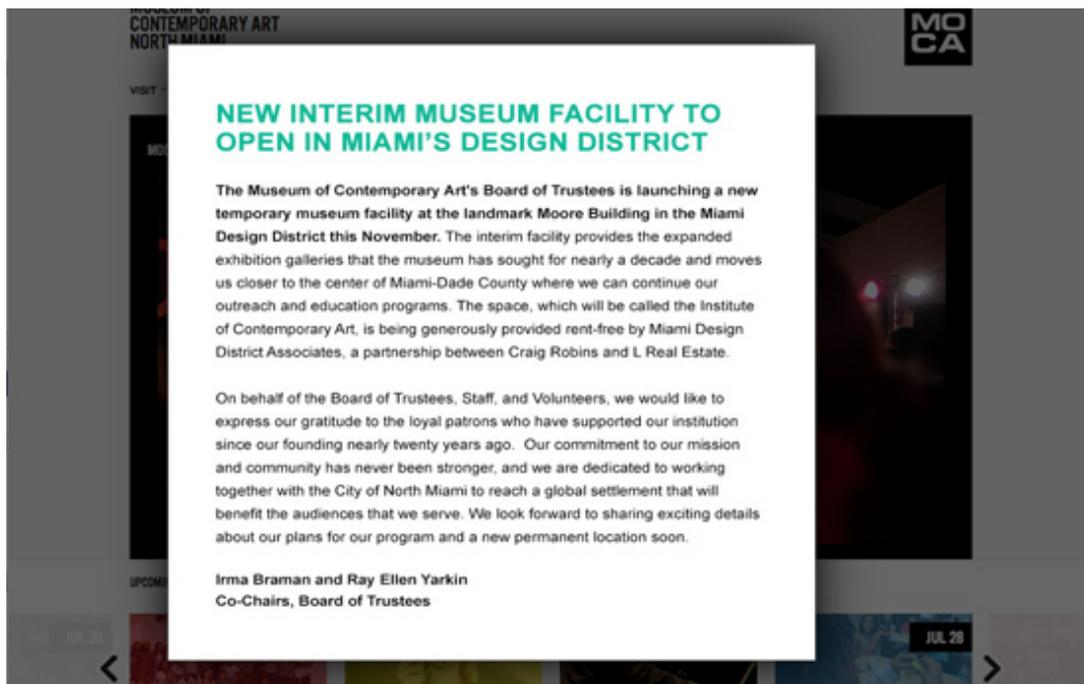
“Harlem On My Mind”, and almost lost his job for refusing then-mayor John Lindsay’s request to remove a catalog essay by a black woman blasting white people and particularly Jews.

Talk about rifts.

Both sides in the [MOCA](#) mess have now filed lawsuits and M’Bow, clearly upset about it, has been quoted saying, “A lawsuit is like a Burmese python; it always starts inoffensively, allowing you to feed while its sole purpose is to eat you.”

Meanwhile, the board of trustees has moved on. Literally. They’ve relocated to Miami’s Design District in the rent-free Moore Building and assumed a new name, the Institute of Contemporary Art.

In the breakup, MOCA will likely keep the house (a 23,000-square-foot building designed by internationally acclaimed architect Charles Gwathmey). [The Institute of Contemporary Art](#) is asking for the contents of the house: the 600-work collection, which includes art by Louise Nevelson and Julian Schnabel.



Notice on MOCA’s website landing page earlier this week.

[Reportedly](#), board chair Irma Braman told M’Bow that she wants to move the collection to the [Bass Museum of Art](#) in Miami Beach and “...keep the MOCA building for programming for minorities,” according to M’Bow.

M’Bow may not object. His avowed aim is to make MOCA a representative of North Miami’s art making.

Stay tuned.

Joan Altabe is an award-winning art and architecture critic, commentator, author and artist. Her books include “Sculpture Off the Pedestal: Monuments and their Makers” and “Art: Behind the Scenes: One Hundred Masters in and out of Their Studios”.

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