

Prostration before Fundamentalists or Prevention of new Mohammed Crises?

At the recently finished World Social Forum in Nairobi Danish artist Jens Galschiot removed the cross from his sculpture of a crucified pregnant teenager after pressure from Christian fundamentalists. Some claim the step was a prostration before fundamentalism, others praise the artist for taking a clever step to deflate the dispute about blasphemy and so he may have prevented a new Mohammed crises.

Galschiot had carried his sculpture *In the Name of God* along to Nairobi to highlight Christian fundamentalists attempt to change the world's policy on contraception alleging that the use of condoms is a kind of abortion and so contrary to God's will. This policy has disastrous consequences for soaring of the AIDS rate.

The sculpture was well received by the grassroots at the WSF and at the demonstrations in the streets of Nairobi where it was it was pushed around on a wheelbarrow. Especially the women adopted the sculpture and hailed the artist for the initiative. 15,000 posters explaining the art manifestation were handed out. Reportedly the posters were seen vastly displayed in the enormous slums of Nairobi.

Galschiot had erected a big wooden cross with the teenager on the Kasarani Stadium, the meeting venue of the 66,000 participants of the Forum. The sculpture attracted attention in the local media where it turned up on the front pages along with Desmond Tutu. CCN, Reuters and other international media interviewed Galschiot.

The artist's staff consisting of Danes, Kenyans and Ugandans had their hands full explaining the aim of the sculpture as an Irish fundamentalist turned up with an incendiary speech with irate attacks against the sculpture, which he compared with the Mohammed drawings. He insisted that Galschiot's cross was blasphemous and that generally the Danish were keen to sully other people's faith. The speech immediately triggered off a heated discussion among the passers-by. Some defended the sculpture, while others claimed it should be banished off the face of the earth. After a couple of hours the crowd broke up, but the infuriated Irishman promised to repeat his performance next day at noon.

From the outset I was aware that dispute about blasphemy could be a thread to this art installation. So I decided to remove the cross bar so that the teenager seemed to be balancing on the post. She still had the posture of crucifixion and stigmatized by the spikes in her hands, Jens Galschiot explains and continues: I did it to let the air out of the announced demonstration and to focus the discussions on President Bush' and the Pope's crusade against condoms. To some extent I succeeded, and the Christian warier striving for a vehement reaction had to content himself with a petition against Denmark.

Some spectators claimed that Galschiot had prostrated himself before fundamentalism by changing his piece of art, others agreed with the artist.

I certainly do not see the change as a prostration. I often adapt my art installations to the culture they are to function in. So I've made a special sculpture for Kenya and the US with the genitals covered by a cloth to avoid a heated dispute about nudity – a taboo in many countries. I see the discussions about nudity and blasphemy as a derailment of the debate about the world's policy on contraception and sexual education, Galschiot declares.

TV documentation: Documentary photographer Niller Madsen joined our staff to cover our participation. He can deliver high quality TV footage, including the heated debate. Contact: Tel.: +45 40 215 415 – E-mail: nillermadsen@mail.tele.dk

For info, photos and diary notes: www.aidoh.dk/WSF2007

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Short presentation: The artist was born in Denmark, 1954. He stakes his art to defend the ethical values of our society, regardless of political, religious or economic interests. His sculptures suddenly appear in public areas and start the performance. Best known are *My Inner Beast* (European cities in 1993) and the *Pillar of Shame* (Hong Kong, Mexico and Brazil).

The projects are financed through the sale of Galschiot's bronze sculptures to art collectors all over the world. He has a huge industrial area in Odense, Denmark with a bronze foundry, gallery and workshop. Photos of all Jens Galschiot's sculptures: <http://sculptures.aidoh.dk>

