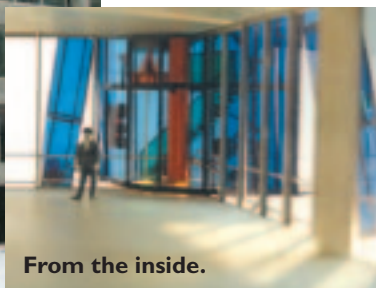


Shirtless

SCOTT WALKER LEFT HIMSELF NAKED BY ATTACKING THE "BLUE SHIRT." SO HOW DID HE GET AWAY WITH IT? BLAME THE MEDIA.



No glass monster: Oppenheim's unpublished images of the shirt.



From the inside.

SCOTT WALKER IS THE BOY WONDER OF MILWAUKEE POLITICS.

A decade ago, he was a fund-raiser for the Milwaukee Blood Center. But after several terms in the state Assembly and the unprecedented promotion by talk radio hosts, the energetic 35-year-old has risen to become the top politician and government administrator in Milwaukee.

That power has now extended to the arts. Walker's first decree, to cancel the "Blue Shirt" sculpture planned for Mitchell International Airport, seems remarkable from any number of perspectives.

Consider the idea that a politician without a college degree, who has never taken a course in art, is now the cultural avatar for the county. (By that measure, Walker is equally qualified to determine the feeding schedule of emus at the zoo or decide county court cases.)

Consider the fact that a fiscal conservative would waste the \$165,000 already spent on "Blue Shirt" and then compound this loss by courting a lawsuit whose legal costs he announced would be charged to the airlines. These companies whose user fees paid the \$165,000 could be charged even more to cancel an artwork to which they've never expressed opposition.

All of this might make some sense if Walker had started an ingenuous debate about public art by expressing even one cogent view on why "Blue Shirt" was a "bad fit" for the airport. But that never happened.

If Walker was really concerned about how "Blue Shirt" would fit the airport garage, he could have taken up artist Dennis Oppenheim's offer to put it up and take it down at his own expense (more than \$30,000) and then let the community decide. Walker rejected a work of art by the most significant international artist ever contracted by the county without ever seeing the final rendering or explaining why it was wrong.

How this could possibly occur comes down to several factors: the power of talk radio, the weakness of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* to make the case and the lack of any powerful champions of art in this community. It's an ugly story, both aesthetically and politically.

Public art is often problematic precisely because it is public.

To assure a broad range of views, the local committee that chose Oppenheim was intelligently broad-based and included artists, architects, art professionals, the convention bureau and the airlines, plus two county supervisors. The committee was established under the county's Percent for Art program, which required that 1 percent of the cost of any building should go to art. This extended to the airport, which the county oversees as a break-even operation supported by user fees.

The parking garage generated \$515,000 for art, creating a momentous opportunity for a public art program, which had floundered due to lack of funds. The committee decided to use the money for three works and was careful politically, making sure to choose one local artist, Evelyn Terry, an African-American woman. Stephen Antonakos, a Percent for Art professional, was also chosen to create some amiable neon. But the precedent-setting signature work was to be Oppenheim's.

The first round of the "controversy" started in early 2001 when the art committee's presentation to county supervisors went awry. The committee was expecting a rubber stamp (in fact, at the time, the supervisors had no authority over the matter) and instead got a lot of angry supervisors who were taken off-guard.

The result was predictable. Politicians poorly prepared to defend public art worried that they would look foolish to their constituents. Several became vocal critics. At that point, it didn't matter because former County Executive F. Thomas Ament ruled the roost and he felt the committee established for that purpose should choose the art. Talk radio hosts Charlie Sykes and Mark Belling fumed about "Blue Shirt," to no avail.

But everything changed after Ament went down. Walker actually made "Blue Shirt" one of his four big issues in the county executive race. Given the many multimillion-dollar fiscal

problems the county faces, it is ludicrous to make a \$220,000 work of art, paid for by user fees at the airport, a major issue.

Before he was elected, Walker repeatedly attacked "Blue Shirt." He now concedes he was looking for an opportunity to cancel the artwork and pounced on Oppenheim's missed deadline. "Up until [then]," Walker told *Milwaukee Magazine*, "I didn't have anything legally to stand on. There wasn't a legal right for me to dislike the artwork." No matter that Oppenheim had fallen behind because of county delays. No matter that Terry also missed her deadline after re-

peatedly pressuring the county for more money than agreed to in her contract.

Last February, *Journal Sentinel* art critic James Auer wrote four articles and more than 3,000 words and columnist Whitney Gould added another 1,200 words in defense of public art. But they never explained why "Blue Shirt" might be a significant work by an important artist and in the right spot at the airport. Nor did the paper ever publish complete and up-to-date renderings of "Blue Shirt." Until now, the public did not know what it would look like on the parking garage.

Finally, the *Journal Sentinel* distilled the

Auer-Gould thesis in an editorial equating the rejection of the work "with people and places suffering from low self-esteem."

This left things easy for Sykes and he had a field day, portraying the issue as the common people vs. the elitists at the liberal newspaper. On the WTMJ Web site, Sykes wrote under the headline "Of Blue Shirts and Snobs": "In Milwaukee, it's about status anxiety... critics whose job it is to evaluate public art invariably gush about anything that calls itself art and insist that the rest of us like it, too, lest we be accused of Not Getting It."

Belling also attacked, but he was not as important on this issue. Because Sykes is often more relentless on the *Journal Sentinel* and because some of the paper's editors hear him when they are driving to work but are busy working when Belling airs, Sykes seems to have the most impact on the newspaper.

But he was wrong about the art.

Now imagine that we, with help from the press, collectively considered the questions any consumer would ask about a potential acquisition of a work of art. What would that discussion be like?

Is Oppenheim a great artist?

Absolutely. Since the later 1960s, Oppenheim has been an acclaimed pioneer in conceptualism, land art, body art, video and sculpture. He's one of the seminal artists who turned art inside out and outside in. Using every medium with equanimity, Oppenheim made galleries into landscapes and landscapes into galleries, making it possible for future artists, for example, to use an airport building as a canvas. Ironically, Oppenheim's 1960s-era installations have made work like Antonakos' neon sculpture possible in public spaces.

Over Oppenheim's more than four-decade career, there are few materials or sensations of the mechanical material world he has not hijacked into his art. He has made machines that grow, eat, replicate, cry and kiss. He has made deer into candelabras and architecture that teeters on the brink of sublimity.

Is this a good work by the artist?

The image of a shirt creates a canny, machine-pressed evocation of the classical torso. And it is styled like something we all enjoy - Times Square advertising. "Blue Shirt" combines the lilt of the best Pop art with the complexity and clarity of conceptual art. From inside the parking garage, you see an enclosure of a bilevel room with stairs, furniture and barbells that are stand-ins for the organs of a body.

"Blue Shirt" provokes thought with a smile just like the popular giant coffee cup on the Milwaukee Coffee Company or the huge inflated pepper that used to be found outside La Perla restaurant. It is a mystery how something so similar to the familiar pleasures of commercial advertising became



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such a controversy. Gigantic images return us to a moment of innocence, seeing the world from a child's point of view.

Is this work in the right place?

Walker has said that he thought it was a "bad fit" for the airport because it would "overwhelm" and "redefine" the parking structure. "Blue Shirt" was created for and needs the building to exist. But the building also needs "Blue Shirt." This blank, sprawling structure needs some punctuation.

The inside of the airport garage is as tedious as the outside, which is why airports typically add graphics to mitigate the alienation of these elongated voids. "Blue Shirt" accomplishes that beautifully. It is strategically placed at the corner of the building that unites the people-mover corridor with the rest of the airport. One of the wonders of "Blue Shirt" is that it works so well for people who are walking and driving by.

And what about the price?

Walker told the *Journal Sentinel* that "cost and location" were his big concerns about the work. So what work at the airport was the best value? First, there is a market for art. At Michael Lord Gallery in Milwaukee, you can pick up a Dennis Oppenheim for \$125,000. More importantly, while the other artists at the airport made money on their commis-

sions, Oppenheim planned to lose money. It is hard to understand why anyone would do this, but that is what artists do from time to time when they think a particular work to be unusually important.

What about the "blue" of "Blue Shirt"?

For the record, the artist has said he picked blue by process of elimination – red, green, and yellow didn't work. But no matter, we all can have our own opinions. Blue can signify the working class but also those who work for IBM, a blue-chip company. It was the color of the Union Army in the Civil War. There are "blue-blooded" aristocrats, blue-ribbon committees and Paul Newman's blue eyes. Picasso had his "blue period" and we all wear blue jeans. We love watching the Blue Angels and we salute our red, white and blue flag. According to the polls, blue is our favorite color, not surprising since it's the color of the sky by day and the earth from space.

Even Walker likes blue. While he was theorizing that the art should have a unifying theme, he told me, "It would be better if you had blue shirts and blue pants at the airport."

In fact, there are already two works at the airport he likes that have no unifying theme. Evelyn Terry has put a floor-to-ceiling lattice-work in front of the elevators that sug-

gests a series of abstract logos for human service operations. Cheery stuff for an institutional waiting room. Antonakos' work consists of dashes of neon that enliven a space like sprinkling jimmies on a sundae. This art does not call attention to itself nor is it particularly ambitious.

Compared to these decorative works, "Blue Shirt" is in a class by itself. It's not an accent; it's the real thing. Unfortunately, in the hubbub, the baby was thrown out with the bathwater. Sykes and Walker did not reject a work of art but rather the idea of real public art.

In theory, the county still has a process for choosing public art, but there is nothing to stop Walker from vetoing the next work and declaring that blue shirts are only acceptable when accompanied by blue pants, blue diceys or blue suede shoes. And when it comes to deciding which art is acceptable, expect lots more acceptable "jimmies" for our county-run facilities. "You can have art that is enhancement," Walker assured me, offering one last dime-store maxim on art.

Of course, Walker won't really be deciding artworks for the county in the years to come. The decision will be made by Sykes and Belling. Walker will merely acquiesce. Why not cut out the middle man and let talk radio become our public art committee? **M**



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