

Park will no longer be fenced in

Rest of student's work removed today

By John Woestendiek

Baltimore Sun, March 29, 2008

The saga of the golden fence -- the contentious artwork that blocked access to Mount Vernon Place in an attempt to make people see the historic park anew -- started coming to an early end this week after vandals removed bolts from several of its sections, making it unstable.

A team of Maryland Institute College of Art students, faculty and staff took down the fence surrounding the east and west quadrants of the park Thursday. They plan to remove the rest, as scheduled, today.

The opening act for a nine-work exhibition by MICA students, the fence went up March 17 and met with harsh criticism from perturbed parkgoers, dog walkers and a City Council member who objected to the exhibit blocking access to the park, a National Historic Landmark District.

Even after the artist, Lee B. Freeman, removed one section of fence from each of the park's four squares last week, allowing the public to get in and out, the troubles and condemnation -- one critic of the fence spat on him -- continued.

The fence was initially to remain around all four quadrants until today, then be taken down in conjunction with the official opening of the exhibit, *Beyond the Compass, Beyond the Square*.

MICA officials say the removal of the bolts, which they called an "act of vandalism," took place Wednesday night. On Thursday, faculty and students discovered bolts missing from the fence around one of the park's quadrants, and because of the fence's weakened condition decided to "deinstall" the fence around the east and west quadrants.

A MICA spokeswoman said a police report probably wasn't filed because the act, despite the hazard it created, "was a form of expression from the community."

Freeman said the rest of the fence will be taken down today and remain "stacked symmetrically" at the park through this weekend. It will be removed next week by the company from which Freeman rented it.

"Angry? No, I wasn't angry. I was curious," the 22-year-old art student said. "It was a pretty intense and well-conceived operation. I suspect a good few people were involved."

Freeman's piece, *Framing Mount Vernon Place*, faced numerous obstacles -- even after procuring all the necessary city approvals and permits.

First, it was delayed two weeks from its original start date, so that Mount Vernon Place

could be used as a staging area for the St. Patrick's Day Parade.

Then, once it was up, complaints about closing the park came from residents and one City Council member, William Cole IV, who plans to introduce a proposal that would require the city to hold public hearings before barring public access to a park for 72 hours or more.

When Freeman, in a compromise, removed one section of fence from each quadrant to allow public access, the structure was weakened and winds toppled a piece of fence in the south quadrant of Mount Vernon Place, chipping a marble column cap in a stairway. MICA has taken responsibility for repairing the damage.

To avoid further damage, the fence was resealed until the next day, when supports were installed to secure it.

Through it all, Freeman -- though supported by the school, fellow students and others who appreciated his work -- faced a barrage of public criticism. "My role was to spark conversation," he said yesterday. "It was sparked, and it moved beyond me."

As part of the exhibition's official opening this weekend, there will be an "interactive street sweep" in connection with another of the student works, The Baltimore Street Sweep Action: Towards the Center.

From 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. today, artists and volunteers will form four "parades" and will sweep the streets leading to the park from the east, west, south and north.

The four groups will converge at the southern square and work with artist Jonathan Taube to complete a collaborative sculpture.

At 1 p.m., the full exhibition will open, with docent-led tours, family activities and entertainment.

The exhibition runs through May and is being held in conjunction with the Walters Art Museum's exhibit Maps: Finding Our Place in the World.

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