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NEWS

## Did an Ursula von Rydingsvard Sculpture Really Make 17 FBI Agents Sick?

A towering cedar sculpture by the world-renowned artist is being blamed for the hospitalization of over a dozen employees at the FBI's Miami field office.



Benjamin Sutton December 7, 2016



A large wooden sculpture by [Ursula von Rydingsvard](#) is being blamed for a series of illnesses suffered by agents working out of the Miami field office of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI). However, the [Politico](#) article linking the installation of the sculpture in the lobby of the [Benjamin P. Grogan and Jerry L. Dove Federal Building](#) to the sudden spike in illnesses there also notes that studies conducted by Federal Occupational Health (FOH) in the building provided no evidence implicating the sculpture in the workers' health problems.

“No possible causes have been confirmed,” Saudia Muwwakkil, a spokesperson for the General Services Administration (GSA), which leases space in the building to the FBI and commissioned the sculpture, told Hyperallergic. “There was insufficient evidence implicating the artwork in the FBI facility and GSA believes the same would be true in any other facility.” This lack of evidence has not prevented Politico and [other sites](#) from [presenting](#) the link between the sculpture and the illnesses as fact.



Ursula von Rydingsvard's "Cedrus" in the lobby of the Benjamin P. Grogan and Jerry L. Dove Federal Building (photo by Nick Merrick at Hedrich Blessing, courtesy the General Services Administration)

The 17-foot-tall work, "Cedrus," was commissioned from the Brooklyn-based artist for \$750,000, and made from 15,000 pounds of Western red cedar that was imported from Vancouver. The sculpture, whose twisting and widening form evokes a tornado, was installed in the building's lobby in early 2015. Shortly thereafter, 17 of the nearly 1,000 FBI employees working in the building became sick, "including at least a dozen who were hospitalized," according to Politico, which goes on to attribute the illnesses to "allergic reactions to cedar dust coming off the sculpture."

Following FBI employees' complaints, the sculpture was initially covered in plastic and then, in October 2015, removed entirely. Installation and deinstallation costs brought its total price tag to \$1.2 million. "Following FBI's request to remove the artwork, GSA worked closely with the artist and the FBI to coordinate relocation of the von Rydingsvard sculpture," a GSA statement provided to Hyperallergic said. "Cedrus' is now temporarily stored in Maryland until a permanent home has been identified. Additional testing conducted in Maryland by FOH again found the sculpture posed no health risk."

For her part, von Rydingsvard has yet to make a public statement about the relocation of "Cedrus." But New York's Galerie Lelong, which represents her, provided Hyperallergic with the following statement:



The gallery is currently waiting for a statement from the commissioning body, the GSA. We are not in a position to make any statement about this work until we receive theirs, but in the meantime, we can state that in over 20 years of representing Ursula von Rydingsvard's work, this is the first time any member of the public has claimed a physical reaction or disturbance to a sculpture.

Though the circumstances that led to the removal of "Cedrus" are fairly unique, this isn't the first time that the GSA has disappeared a large, site-specific sculpture it had commissioned. The agency famously dismantled Richard Serra's "Titled Arc" (1981) after it had stood for nearly a decade in Lower Manhattan's Federal Plaza. As art historian Harriet F. Senie captivatingly recounted in her book on the controversy, much of the public outcry against "Tilted Arc" was the result of misinformation.



The Benjamin P. Grogan and Jerry L. Dove Federal Building at 2030 SW 145th Avenue in Miami's Miramar district (all images courtesy the General Services Administration, via [gsa.gov](https://www.gsa.gov))