WALTHAM, Mass. — Few things are more poignant than a gem of a museum whose days may be numbered. So it was at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University on a visit Friday, days after the university’s trustees voted unanimously to trash the institution by closing it and auctioning off the 6,000 works in its collection. The action came without consulting either the museum’s own board of governors or its director, Michael Rush.

The Brandeis vote was an act of breathtaking stealth and presumption: a raid on a museum that supports itself, raises its own funds and has consistently planned wisely for its own future without leaning on the university. The trustees treated it nonetheless as a disposable asset.

On Friday the only signs of any disturbance were on the exterior of the Rose’s dainty, cast-concrete building, which opened in 1961, just 13 years after the university itself was founded. The museum’s glass front was festooned with posters that exclaimed, “Don’t Close the Rose” and “Fire Sale,” the remnants of a student sit-in the day before.

But inside, the art was, as usual, doing what art is always trying to do, speak to people directly about pleasure and beauty, about personal capacity and freedom, about how individuals acting on their own can find themselves, express those findings and make a difference.

The symbiosis that art creates among individual works, among people and among disciplines was everywhere evident. In the airy Lois Foster Wing, which, when completed in 2001, gave the museum its first large gallery space, an invigorating array of paintings and watercolors by Hans Hofmann — all from 1950 — recount a big year in the creative life of this important teacher of young Abstract Expressionists. Here is an artist at the top of his form, giving his all. Any would-be painters in the gallery are reminded that gestural painting, seemingly the easiest kind to do, has a long history and must be approached with a great deal of insight and discipline. The show gives the kind of transformative personal encounter with art that will no long be offered to Brandeis students.

In the original 1961 part of the museum, “Saints and Sinners,” an exhibition drawn largely from the museum’s holdings, shows Brandeis interacting with the larger world of art and art institutions. It is part of a new series of shows organized by artists and curators from outside, in this case Laura Hoptman, a curator at the New Museum in New York. The works she has selected confirm the excellence of the Rose collection: pieces by Roy Lichtenstein, Bruce Conner, Philip Guston and Morris Louis. But beyond that, they create a daisy chain of links that invite close looking. Older artworks suddenly look fresh, recent ones seem utterly
at home.

It is hard to know how anyone could destroy this museum, but that’s what Brandeis announced it would do last Monday. It’s hard to think of a comparably destructive — and self-destructive — move in the art world today.

The rationale, given by Brandeis, was the university’s dire financial straits: a 25 percent decline in its endowment, a $10 million deficit on this year’s budget and the reality that fund-raising will falter because of the market’s skid. You could almost feel the collective tremor of university museums around the country, as well as art dealers circling, indignant collectors demanding that the Rose return donated gifts of art, and prospective donors changing their wills.

Speaking to The Boston Globe, Lois Foster, a longtime benefactor, whose husband built the Lois Foster Wing barely eight years ago, compared it to a death. As the director, Mr. Rush, noted, even if the trustees reversed themselves or the museum was saved, who would ever again trust its autonomy enough to donate to it?

What the university’s president, Jehuda Reinharz, and the trustees don’t seem to realize is how their actions stain the reputation of Brandeis itself. He characterized the choice as “painful” and “difficult,” but it had all the earmarks of a desperate quick fix rather than a rational decision. He even said it in no way diminished Brandeis’s commitment to the visual arts, pointing out the university could turn the museum into an arts studio and study center. But the decision was devastating for the university’s art and art history departments, which have always relied heavily on the museum.

At the museum on Friday, Aliza Sena, a 19-year-old sophomore, said that graduating seniors in art and art history were especially traumatized. “It’s like the school telling them that their degree is fluff,” Ms. Sena said. She transferred this year from Tulane University after deciding that she wanted to major in art rather than business, and the Rose was a major factor in her choice.

“I’m devastated,” she said. “It’s crushing to figure out this school’s priorities, and sad that they can make a decision without consulting anyone knowledgeable. It really makes me reconsider being here.”

The outcry in the art world was also fast and furious, with more than a few people noting that the rapidly sinking art market made this an idiotic time to sell art. By week’s end Mr. Reinharz was backpedaling on the sale, saying it was not clear what would be sold or when. He was nonetheless adamant that the museum would be closed.

Of course he was. What better way to avoid the messy legalities of deaccessioning artworks, with the attendant denunciations from Association of Art Museum Directors and other professional organizations that monitor and weigh in on sales of individual works of art? (The association’s guidelines say that art works can be sold only to finance acquisitions.) If there is no museum, there are no guidelines to violate.

The Rose is an innocent bystander that is being punished for its excellence. Its budget is balanced; it has brought Brandeis nothing but glory and prestige at almost no cost. Throughout its short life, the museum has been an object of passion for a small group of benefactors who have paid for its building and two additions and have bolstered its endowment and donated acquisition funds. Perhaps most important of all,
80 percent of the art in the museum’s collection has been given to it by donors.

In addition to receiving almost no money from Brandeis, the Rose must do its fund-raising outside of the university’s donor base; but then, when the museum spends any of the money it raises, 15 percent of it must be paid to the university. In return for this Brandeis pays for the Rose’s light and heat.

And now the trustees have stepped in and said, in effect, “Thank you very much for your dedication, generosity and sacrifice, but this jewel is ours to dispose of as we please.”

But the greater the art, the greater number of people “own” it. The greater its power, the more it expands our lives. In a just and moral society, art is crucial to our understanding of freedom, difference and individual agency.

The message out of Brandeis University last week — to its own students and to the world — was that when the going gets tough, none of this matters. Art is dispensable.