

Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder: Art and Censorship

When the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities was first created in 1965, there were dreams of “encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry,” and helping “creative talent.” The intent of the Congress in passing the act which established the NEA is recorded in the Senate Report stating, “It is the intent of this committee that in the administration of this act there be given the fullest attention to freedom of artistic and humanistic expression....” The dream has faded. Congress now thinks that art is dangerous if it makes people uncomfortable.

Censorship has been present in the arts nearly as far back as art has existed in society. Its history is extensive in that with each generation that has passed, patterns of what society had viewed as obscene and aesthetic has drastically changed. This has brought about many conflicts over what is considered acceptable and unacceptable artwork. Perception of art styles and particular pieces of work fluctuate a great deal over time due to changes in cultural values and current events. This fluctuation of viewpoints is evident in many early artists whose works are now seen as masterpieces. For example, Manet’s Olympia painting; in his time and culture, it was seen as a degrading and immoral painting. It was a shock to the community that he would paint such sensuous, erotic pictures of harlots in such blazing colors and aggressive brushwork. These works, and the rest of the pieces he created, are currently regarded as some of the most exceptional pieces of art. Similarly, Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel was greeted with both shock and disgust. Not only did people develop strong emotions in response to the nude images Michelangelo presented, but the art actually became at risk when it was almost destroyed due to the following controversy. Michelangelo’s work, similar to Manet’s work, are currently regarded

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as some of the most brilliant pieces of art ever conceived. Such drastic changes in response to art show how difficult it is to set guidelines for censorship. What may be considered offensive today, could be considered great achievements just a few years from now.

Censorship is any effort to suppress images, ideas, or information. It can be imposed by the government or self-imposed by the artists. Most Americans would prefer to do this themselves rather than let a government committee decide what their children read, watch, and think, as well as what they, the adult, reads, watches or thinks. All aspects of our culture, including the arts, influence our attitudes and ideas about the world. Art, music, advertising, the mass media, education, religious training, families and communities, all shape the kind of people we are and who we will become. A person who learned respect for others early on, will most likely not be converted to “hooliganism” by the movies. Furthermore, human beings are various and distinctive. We each respond to art, literature, and culture in different ways. The value of free speech is that it permits a wide range of ideas to flourish so individuals can grow, learn and decide for themselves what ideas to accept or reject.

Karl Marx, who produced a comment on a set of instructions issued by the Prussian government censor, observed that “the censorship should not prevent serious and modest investigation of truth....Is it not the first duty of the seeker after truth to aim directly at truth, without looking to the right or left? Will I not forget the essence of the matter, if I am obliged not to forget to state it in the prescribed form?” Artists express the dark as well as the sunny side of humanity and use many techniques to dramatize their concerns such as exaggeration, symbolism, metaphor, dream, and fantasy. In June 1990, four artists were refused NEA fellowships because of the controversial nature of their performances. Their work illuminates socio-political issues

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like homosexuality, AIDS, and violence against women. John Frohnmayer, who was then-Chairman of the NEA, denied the unanimous recommendations of the NEA's peer review panel to award fellowships to performance artists Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, and John Fleck. If artistic merit were the standard, they deserved the fellowships. Artists and others with messages to communicate often find it necessary to shock in order to be seen or heard. Offensive speech sometimes gives rise to strong emotions, but it can also foster critical thinking. If that learning process is going to happen, censorship cannot cut off the stimulus.

Art expresses things about life, about people, and about oneself that are not revealed in political or scientific thought. Its great power consists in its ability to connect human beings, as though by invisible wires, at the most profound and intimate levels. To become whole human beings requires the truth about the world, and about themselves, that art offers. A true work of art appeals to and sets loose powerful forces within the beholder. It brings to the point of highest tension, if only in what Freud called "the deepest layers of the psychic mechanism," the conflict between life as it is and life as it has appeared only in humanity's dreams. David Walsh, arts editor of the World Socialist Web Site and the author of many essays on contemporary art and culture, quoted Engels who wrote in 1883 for the *Sozialdemokrat* a tribute to the German poet and revolutionary Georg Weerth, in his lecture *The Aesthetic Component of Socialism*. Walsh said, "It is high time that at least the German workers get accustomed to speaking in a free and easy manner as do the peoples of the Romantic lands, Homer and Plato, Horace and Juvenal, the Old Testament, and the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, about the things they themselves do every day or night, these natural, indispensable and highly pleasurable things."

Apparently, society does not like to "see" things in art that happen in everyday life that

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would make the commoner more aware of what is happening in the world or in other cultures, or at least that is what the government has tried and is still trying to dictate. In October 1999, the Brooklyn Museum of Art was set to open and exhibit a show called “Sensation” by Chris Ofili, who is known for using elephant feces in his work. New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was appalled by the previewing advertisement for the exhibit, especially by *The Holy Virgin Mary*, a 1996 collage by Ofili. Giuliani is quoted as saying, “The idea of having so-called works of art in which people are throwing elephant dung at a picture of the Virgin Mary is sick.” He then proceeded to announce that the city would cut its funding to the museum by about seven million this year, or a third of the museum’s budget, unless “Sensation” was canceled. The mayor and his aides depict the creator of “Sensation” and his defenders as members of a narrow Catholic-bashing elite. But Ofili traces his roots to a Nigerian culture in which elephant dung has sacred connotations. Amazingly, the mayor, his Senate rival Hillary Rodham Clinton, Democratic New York Politicians and some museum directors share the mayor’s view. They’ve all wrapped a cautious defense of the Brooklyn museum’s funding in the condemnation of a show they have not attended, fearful that the public cannot draw its own distinctions between bad taste and the Bill of Rights.

Artists and especially controversial artists are always susceptible to manipulation and censorship. Sometimes the action is overt and other times it is subtle. Artists are often asked to change parts of their works to conform to the public’s morality. This has been going on since the Pope had Michaelangelo paint fig leaves on Adam and Eve. Controversy first erupted in 1989 over the NEA’s support for institutions that displayed the work of photographers Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. For months, Senator Jesse Helms and others attacked the

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NEA for subsidizing “disgusting” and “blasphemous” art with “taxpayers’ money.” Eventually, they introduced the measure mandating the NEA to take standards of decency into consideration. There was no question about the intent of the bill. Its sponsors intended the law as an act of censorship. They wanted the government arts agency to cease handing out cash to works of artists whose nonconformist behavior or alternative views they disliked. Unfortunately, it seems that T.S. Elliot was right when he wrote in “Burnt Norton,” “Human kind cannot bear very much reality.”

“You admire the delightful variety, the inexhaustible riches of nature. You do not demand that the rose should smell like the violet, but must the greatest riches of all, the spirit, exist in only one variety? I am humorous, but the law bids me write seriously. I am audacious, but the law commands that my style be modest. Grey, all grey, is the sole, the rightful color of freedom. Every drop of dew on which the sun glistens with an inexhaustible play of colours, but the spiritual sun, however many the persons and whatever the objects in which it is refracted, must produce only the official color!” wrote Karl Marx in early 1842. Must we, as a society, all believe and like the same thing? In October 1996, Madison East High School art gallery had an artwork hanging up that was titled “Madonna and Rat.” Bottom line, one day the painting is hanging in the gallery, and the next day, it is not. The only reason the painting was removed was somebody complained. The “rat art” must have offended somebody. But, think about it, what a bland society we would live in if anything and everything that offends somebody were removed.

An artist’s responsibility is to share the truth with the public, be it “good” truth or “bad” truth. It is the artist’s duty to display the truths of humanity to make others aware. It makes a person ask themselves if portraits of naked children (Mapplethorpe), or a work title “Piss Christ”

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(Serrano) are truths. How can a world allow this kind of work to be created? Are artists exempt from being “punished” for their “art”, but a child pornography producer is not? Yes, as hard as it is to believe, there is a difference. Pornography is created for the sole intention and purpose of being degrading and abusing the beauty of the body and the beauty of sex. But then there are those who say that art can do that, also. And that is right, it can, but then it should not be tolerated, for then it is not art, but pornography. There is a fine, blurry line distinguishing the two and most times, the line cannot be found. The official definition of obscenity has three parts: A work must depict sex in a patently offensive way, it must be designed to cause sexual arousal, and it must have no artistic, scientific, or technical value. Pornography’s whole purpose is to treat human beings obscenely, to deprive them of their humanness. Pornography and obscenity appeal to and provoke a kind of sexual regression. The pleasure a person gets from pornography and obscenity is “infantile and autoerotic.” It is a upsetting fact that any system of censorship is bound, upon occasion, to treat unjustly a particular work of art; to find pornography where there is only “gentle eroticism,” to find obscenity where it doesn’t really exist. The government would be better off enforcing current laws against depictions of real children engaged in real sex and not chase fantasies and their depiction in art.

Artistic form has an independent and objectively significant power to enrich spiritual experience and refine feeling. Trotsky believed art, as a form of spiritual culture, had this objective character. “It is one of the ways in which man finds his bearings in the world; in this sense the heritage of art is not distinguished from the heritage of science and technique—and it is no less contradictory than they. Unlike science, however, art is a form of cognition of the world not as a system of laws but as a group of images.” Art is similar to science, but achieves its end

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in a different way, through the process of images. Why, then, must art be treated differently than science, in respect? Art does the same thing as science, it “cognizes” life. Aleksandr Voronsky who wrote “Art as the Cognition of Life” said, “Like science, art cognizes life. Both art and science have the same subject: life, reality. But science analyzes, art synthesizes; science is abstract, art is concrete; science turns to the mind of man, art to his sensual nature. Science cognizes life with the help of concepts, art with the aid of images in the form of living, sensual contemplation...The genuine poet, the genuine artist is one who sees ideas.” The artworks are ideas, fantasy and reality blurred, images of truth projected for humanity to see and take note. They are speaking out to the world from a medium that one will listen and they know it. Artists should be respected as much as scientists and realized that their work is different in the sense of the subject that they display. Are scientists censored, asked to discontinue work for fear it might offend the public, funding cut for fear that it would hurt someone’s political career? No, and neither should art.

“...Truth is general, it does not belong to me alone, it belongs to all, it owns me, I do not own it. My property is the form, which is my spiritual individuality. *Le style c’est l’homme*. [Style is the man] Yes, indeed! The law permits me to write, only I must write in a style that is not mine! I may show my spiritual countenance, but I must first set it in the prescribed folds! What man of honour will not blush at this presumption...?” stated Karl Marx. An open free and democratic society does not limit or alter or suppress information and artwork but rather trusts in the individual’s right to decide for themselves.

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