

Censorship: Handmaid of Homophobia



ALAIN MCNAULIN/REACTION IMAGES

San Francisco photographer Jock Sturges had millions of his photographic negatives seized by the FBI.

The purpose of art is to "create images which represent God's creatures, not miscarriages between man and monkey." So said Adolph Hitler, shortly before his minister of propaganda ordered the burning of books which did not meet the Nazi prescription for morality and family values.

From the Helms Amendment banning federal funding of homoerotic art to the arrest of a Florida store owner for renting "Pink Flamingos," to the seizure of the photographs of Jock Sturges, Americans in 1990 have seen a wave of censorship enacted in the name of traditional family values and morality.

While Hitler opposed art, music and literature which even hinted at sentiments contrary to those of his regime, many arts leaders and civil rights activists say that today's repression of sex-positive or provocative art in the U.S. is singularly driven by homophobia and AIDSphobia.

By HENRI DONAT

"I think the censorship that we see these days is frightening," says Bill Rubenstein, attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union. "Much of it is focused at lesbian and gay speech. Many of the first gay rights cases involved the rights of gay men to congregate, to associate with one another. Our first victories involved First Amendment issues."

It is the First Amendment right of freedom of expression that arts leaders and gay activists say was violated when an exhibition of the work of late gay photographer Robert

Mapleton at Cincinnati's Center for Contemporary Arts led to the arrest of museum curator Dennis Barrie earlier this year.

Barrie and the CCA were indicted on charges of pandering obscenity. Of seven photographs cited in the complaint, two were of nude children, each alone and not engaged in sexual activity, others were of black and white men together, and one was a sexually explicit self-portrait of the artist.

In a recent interview with rock reporter Kurt Loder, Madonna, who had her own censorship battle in Canada involving her stage performance there, thinks that behind today's anti-gay, anti-miscegenation regression is "fear of AIDS. It's turned everybody into these '50s mongers. That's my opinion. That's why everything is changing."

Those challenging the use of homoeroticism, nudity and sexuality in art and music are familiar gay rights opponents. Sen. Jesse Helms' amendment to the National Endowment for the Arts appropriations bill is one of many anti-gay riders placed on bills by the homophobic legislator. Also lobbying for removal of art deemed in their opinion as offensive are leaders of the Traditional Values Coalition in California and Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition.

In a recent campaign letter, Helms said his opponents are "the radical feminist crowd, the 'radical chic' artists and Union Bosses. . . . They want to destroy what Jesse Helms stands for: traditional American values, faith in God, love of country and family."

Tom DiMaria, executive director of Frameline, the gay arts and media organization in

San Francisco, says the position of the right wing poses a difficult stance for gay rights activists and arts leaders to rally against. "When censorship is twisted to look like the American way, with the right wing saying 'Look what they've done to your cross [in Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ" which portrays a crucifix submerged in a yellow liquid], we're in for a tough time."

Frameline's 14th annual lesbian and gay film festival received a \$9,000 grant from the NEA this year, funds specifically earmarked for administrative support. DiMaria was asked by the NEA to sign a letter stating that the organization would abide by the Helms Amendment. "The amendment says that works 'taken as a whole' must have artistic value," DiMaria says, "For us not to sign the letter would mean that our films were not artistic. However, we do of course take issue with the amendment." He adds that NEA representatives visited the film festival to see "first hand" what the organization does, but that there was no direct pressure from the NEA in terms of what was shown.

Craig Davidson of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation believes "without question" that censorship in the '90s is motivated by homophobia and AIDSphobia. "The most obvious example is the NEA," he says. "They define homoeroticism in general as obscene. The increased visibility of gays is giving [the right wing] a focus for their Neanderthal views."

DiMaria agrees: "It's not so much a reaction to art, but a reaction to an alternative lifestyle. They want to silence our behavior

and visibility."

Why are the arts now being used as a tool to oppress the gay minority? Art is as vulnerable today as it was to Hitler propagandists 50 years ago because of its accessibility and the lack of strong political organizing by artists. The First Amendment says that Congress will pass no law hindering freedom of expression, but The U.S. Supreme Court declined to draw the line of obscenity, turning the issue over to state and local obscenity laws where art is particularly vulnerable to the right wing.

What does this mean to artists? For many, it means self-censorship. According to DiMaria, in a recent meeting of arts leaders in Washington, D.C., some said they would remove lesbian and gay artists from their programs, while others would withhold from the NEA any information that they exhibited gay artists.

Photographer Sturges, whose work is featured in New York's Museum of Modern Art and Vivotech Nationale in Paris, had his life's work seized by the FBI after an employee at a film processing lab told police Sturges' work was pornographic. In an interview in the *San Francisco Weekly*, Sturges says "I can't tell you how frightened I am that my artistic ability has been severely damaged by this trauma."

In her keynote address to a confederation of California Arts leaders, author Isabel Allende proclaimed: "Art has the power to move the viewer and . . . to change him. Tyrants of all ages have tried to master and subvert that force."

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