

Censoring the Archive... It's a dick thing

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Keynote presentation: 'Bodies of Knowledge: Sexuality and the Archives'

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Excuse the cheeky title of this talk but I've grown quite cynical over the years about the idea of censorship and why certain things disappear from public view. So given the opportunity to speak at this conference, "the Archive" for an artist such as myself is constituted not only in some kind of permanent repository for images, but the cultural memory through which the work is recalled as significant and through which it continues to live. In the hopes of activating the latter, I'm going to show you a small selection of the work I've done, relate some of the stories attached to specific work, and try to contextualize, in multiple ways, what I mean by "a dick thing."

What constitutes censorship is complicated and layered. There is very little actual censorship in the US, despite the fact that visual artists, writers, and musicians make the claim quite often that there is. However, there's not a great deal of affective difference between censorship and neglect, and certainly no difference whatsoever between outright censorship and control of certain kinds of information and images.

Sometimes I need to be reminded that there was a time, not all that long ago, when it didn't seem treasonous or blasphemous to believe art and artists were valuable to American culture for their insights and willingness to take risks. When it wasn't treasonous or blasphemous for artists to be involved with contentious ideas no matter how unpopular and antagonistic they might be. When artists could make work without fear of home invasion, detention, arrest, or lengthy and expensive legal battles to prove they aren't perverts or terrorists. When artists didn't have to consult a lawyer to make sure what they were planning wouldn't place them in legal jeopardy. But that was then, and this is emphatically and abysmally now.

I used to feel protected in an academic environment. I thought we were in a battle with

the encroaching anti-intellectualism of religious and political conservatism over “dangerous ideas” that some people were just too repressed to consider. I thought the point of being in an institution of higher learning was to be involved in spirited and far-ranging discussions engaging those dangerous ideological and intellectual ideas – ideas that provide stimulation for students and colleagues alike. That now seems like romanticized, wishful thinking. There are limits to academic freedom.

Whether it’s a college, public or private university or an art school, it is a fantasy to believe (as I once did) that the population of said institution shares the same or similar value system, which I always hoped would be as far left as possible, libertarian, and perhaps even libertine. What I’ve found instead, particularly in the last 10 – 15 years are liberal institutions in servitude to political correctness. Please don’t misunderstand my intention in saying this, there were very good reasons for the conceptual ideas that eventually became the codified institution of political correctness. Feminism and the civil rights movement of the 70s were the incredibly powerful foundation of ideas that have forever affected American culture, (and I will contain my remarks to American culture.)

These movements cast an invaluable spectral light on societal problems and short-comings, and they did so, in part, by wresting control from the power elite and choosing the terms and language of the discourse. But the drive to refashion language, and control thought and behavior contains its own destructive and defective seeds. The demand to use the right words never created lasting solutions to any of the problems we faced (sexism, racism, homophobia haven’t disappeared) and in fact politically correct language rather quickly reproduced the same kind of intolerance and intractability it fought to overcome.

The very inception of politically correct language and behavior was, and is, problematic. When liberals sought to control the rhetoric of discourse and dictate what was acceptable, they forgot something...

If a construct isn’t self-critical, it can never be better than what it seeks to overtake.

I have to ask:

Is the construct not sound enough to stand on its own? Will internal critique be its undoing? If the construct doesn't allow for internal critique, those who espouse the tenets of a particular construct, appear to admit the construct is flawed. Both second wave feminism and the identity politics outgrowth of the civil rights movement suffered under this illusion that internal criticism would make it seem like the movements were unraveling.

And so, the original means to an end became little more than a despotic cleansing of all critical or questioning conversation.

Politically correct liberals and the conservative right are 2 sides of the same coin. Both are interested in behavior modification and both engage in suppression of images and ideas that don't serve their social agendas. The right has simple demands – it won't tolerate anything that has to do with sex or the criticism of religion, government, or their public figures.

The left (unfortunately) has a much longer and more complicated list that includes both affirmative and prohibitive demands:

- They want to memorialize tragedy and confer honored victim status on everyone who has ever been wronged (and the list of “wrong-doing” is quite long).**
- They believe many things to be inappropriate subject matter for making art: 9/11, the holocaust, the homeless, body manipulation seen as self harm, anything to do with animals.**
- They believe sex in art is fine as long as it's erotic and not pornographic; if an artist or academic is interested in pornography they can analyze it (and either vilify or glorify it, it doesn't matter) but making it is total perversion.**

- They believe concepts like objectification and exploitation occur even when people they believe are being objectified and exploited say they're not, rendering the subjects mute.
- As an extension of that, they have the humanitarian urge to protect certain marginalized groups of people through the use of approved language and altered attitudes.

And last but by no means least...

- They don't seem to enjoy looking at the naked male body any more than their right wing counterparts do. This assumes of course, a heterosexual male viewer. It's that dick thing again.

With those remarks as a bit of background, I'm going to show you very brief excerpts from a project I completed in October of 2006 that was a direct response to issues of political correctness in the academic art community.

Panhandler Project

The politically correct world requires a certain guardianship of the disenfranchised, among other "less abled" groups. So how are street people (the "homeless") to be represented? This is a question that has provoked arguments among cultural theorists and photography teachers for over 20 years. "Just don't" seems to be the current solution. Although I understand the pitfalls in making a homeless person the subject or object of a photograph, I am disturbed by the regulatory nature of the prohibition and invectives so often employed.

Most problematic for me is the apparent belief that this segment of the population as a group needs special treatment and protection by (and perhaps from) the art world – ostensibly because they are unable to give informed consent about the use of their image. This condescending and infantilizing attitude reflects its counterpart – indifference toward anything other than the theoretical implications of representation. It has become routine to denounce images made of the homeless as exploitive, based on a

predictable and unexamined political correctness. It is the very denunciation that reduces palpable humans to nothing more than victims to be scrutinized in academic discussions.

A sexually charged atmosphere permeated each shoot and The Panhandler Project is intended to engage the viewer in questioning notions of exploitation, objectification, and agency as well as the (perhaps) more arguable issues that arise in regard to race, class and the sexualization of the bodies of men who are rarely if ever seen as sexual objects.

It is always easier to argue theoretically on either side about the abstract nature of representation and what images mean. However, my intent is to reconfigure the debate to include the subjects of the photographs and video, who have become the objects in an argument that never directly involves them.

Being educated, liberal, hyper-sensitive, and until about 3 years ago, determined to be politically correct, one of my biggest fears was saying or doing something that could be considered racist. In thinking about why I did this project, I found that I was interested in putting myself in situations in which I would have to confront my incorrect political correctness. I wanted to see if my fears and discomfort about “sounding” or even being racist in my assumptions and language had some real basis or if it was fueled by the years of PC training I had undergone in academia.

Thus my challenge: to create a work so seemingly politically *in*correct that it causes, in fact, demands a response.

Nudity in American culture, particularly male nudity, continues to be a contentious issue - the height of exploitation and humiliation for many being the exposure of the naked body. This project directly confronts that notion through the production of video documentation and photographs of the 5 men. I don't make any pretense to create a cross section of the homeless population in Chicago – there are only 5 men and all are African American. My intention is to trouble and question issues of race and who is of the appropriate ethnicity to do what to whom.

Academic indoctrination is the tool that has been used to make artists compliant with the latest in politically correct language and behavior. It's a self-regulating system, like Bentham's panopticon. And the cooling effect results in self censorship. This manifests in three ways:

1 - Controversial or socially disturbing subjects are less likely to sell, less likely to be funded by public or most private grants, and less likely to be shown or reproduced in books and magazines.

2 - artists are less inclined to make work that might address subjects that challenge and trouble the issues that have the potential for creating an expanded dialogue about race, class and gender in fear of academic criticism. And

3 - even if they were so inclined to explore the ideas liberal academics find so abhorrent, the negative criticism they confront, not getting tenure track jobs, and if they do, not receiving tenure, being called out by a student or their parents for something shown or discussed in the classroom, are all great incentives to walk the straight and narrow. If "controversial" work is made at all, it's base of support is rather small, guaranteeing limited exposure at best.

So what does this all have to do with the archive? In the visual arts - art history books, artist's monographs, art magazines, and museum collections make up the canon, and the canon is the archive, both physical and virtual. Artists who don't make it into the canon are essentially non-existent. The whole mission of the women's movement in the arts was to unearth female artists who were lost to cultural memory and art history through neglect. Today, the gender bias is secondary compared to the cultural bias against particular bodies and what they represent.

Artists exist in the broadest of cultural fields and the tacit restrictions of academia and the economic realities of the art world are only part of what there is to contend with.

Censorship is offered to the public in the name of safety. In the U.S., censorship is promoted as a way of protecting the public, particularly women and children. Most at

risk are photographic images ranging from pornography to fine art, even snapshot images of children made by parents and family members become suspect. The sexual hysteria of the last quarter of the 20th century not surprisingly continues into the 21st. Has there ever been a more damned and despised individual than the pedophile? But is the pedophile the scapegoat to deflect America's embarrassing obsession with children; the obsession is not to protect them. Just the opposite. Children are sexualized and fetishized to an extreme. Is there any wonder there is an obsession with young flesh.

This 2nd video I'm going to show is an attempt to address the more complicated issues that might be involved when considering intergenerational sexual experiences.

Steven X and Barbara C

This is a young girl who uses her sexuality aggressively without regret or shame, and without having been the victim of sexual "abuse," which seems to be the only framework within which her sexuality can be understood. It's easier to blame child or adolescent sexuality on an instance of molestation than entertain the idea that children are interested in sex, might like it, and might actually be the agent in making it happen.

I recently opened a package in my basement to find a photograph from a series of portraits I made when I was in my first year of graduate school. The subjects were a friend and his two sons, aged 7 and 9. It was 1978. All three were nude. This is the image:

"Peter and his sons"

The first time I exhibited the work was in an outdoor, one night street fair exhibition in Albuquerque, NM. Within an hour of the opening, a group of Baptists had gathered in front of my work chanting, "pornography is sin." A half hour later, the police and a news crew were there as well. Apparently someone had called both after an argument turned into a shoving match between myself and a rather substantial redheaded woman from the church group. The incident was on the news that night and was followed the next day

by a newspaper article.

Today one would immediately think the group was incensed over what would possibly be considered child pornography. Not so. They were, instead, upset by the nudity itself, not the ages of two of the models. Of particular concern were the genitalia. This photograph was exhibited several more times in various shows in the late 70s and early 80s, without incident. When I came across that print, I lifted the mat and found a note that had been there for at least 25 years. It read:

The NOTE

Please shoot this twice -

- 1) the full image, as wide as necessary, and
- 2) cropped above the genitalia

I have a vague recollection that it was being shot for a catalogue and the printer was offended by the image, refusing to print it with genitals visible. In this particular case as with the Baptists, the photographing of nude children was not the problem. It was the genitals, particularly that of the adult, the father, the hairy one. Adult males, of course, are even more offensive to the general public than naked children; their lewd, indecent “parts” are pronounced and obvious. The aversion to the male sex organ is ubiquitous in US culture, and it’s a powerful aversion. Once again, it’s a dick thing...and some things never change.

But despite any early difficulty in showing or publishing the image, I want to make it clear that in the late 70s and early 80s, it would never have been included under the 2 current categories of illegal, prosecutable imagery -- those being child pornography and obscenity. Just to clarify -- pornography is legal, child porn and obscenity are not. How obscenity is determined is completely arbitrary. Pornography is a form of free speech but it’s protection under the first amendment of the US constitution is not guaranteed.

The combined image (leave on screen)

So this combined image of the note and the portrait would almost certainly, if put on public display either in a gallery or on the internet, be illegal now even though it wasn't 29 years ago when it was made. The manner in which images are semiotically understood shifts with the political climate. What was once accepted as a representation of childhood innocence can become a condemned image of potential pedophilic enjoyment.

One more story about this image of "Peter and His Sons" and the note found under the mat. I was asked to be an expert witness in a trial initiated by the American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU, on behalf of approximately 50 online businesses such as book sellers like Barnes and Noble and e-magazines like Nerve and Salon.com. The lawsuit was brought to prevent the enforcement of the Child Online Protection Act (COPA), legislation that had been enjoined from enforcement by the same lower federal court in Philadelphia in 1998. The Department of Justice (the DOJ) had contested that decision, it went to the Supreme Court and they in turn, gave it back to the lower court. The case is on its second of at least three journeys, and will certainly find its way back to the U.S. Supreme Court...eventually.

The legislation would have made it a crime punishable by prison and/or \$50,000 fine to have sexually explicit material on a website without a credit card barrier for verification of age (and to be clear on the potential risk, every day a site was "up" on the internet was a separate infraction-at \$50,000 a day). It was intended to stop children from finding free porn on the internet. However it also takes away an adult's constitutional right to access this material, and it puts an enormous burden on small businesses and artists who may have sexual material on their websites. The DOJ argued that artists had nothing to fear with the legislation because they weren't on the internet as a business, which is where I come in, and where I thought I could push the envelope.

I was to testify to show that a "legitimate, professional" artist could easily be affected by the legislation, and in my case, the added bonus for the ACLU was that I am also a full professor, with tenure, and the chair of the Photography Department, at one of the most prestigious art school in the US. Part of my testimony was that websites are used for

getting exhibitions, speaking engagements, and potentially selling work (all of which would constitute having a business.) The biggest problem would not necessarily be in regard to selling but in the way it would hinder most if not all traffic to the site, because to access the site at all, you would have to have a credit card. Since sales don't take place on line, who would trust that using a credit card only for age verification would not potentially include a risk of identity theft? I took of poll of faculty, students, and friends, asking if they would use a credit card for age verification to access an artist website. They all said no. The fear of identity theft trumped any curiosity about or necessity to see the artist's work.

The other reason I was to testify was to demonstrate the extreme, to show that legitimate, respected, artists were doing work that might be construed as pornographic, and thus be liable under COPA. To that end, the ACLU sited the 1994 revocation of a \$25,000 National Endowment for the Arts Artist Fellowship I had been awarded. After successful peer panel review, the grant was withdrawn by the National Council on the Arts, the politically appointed group that made final judgments on all NEA awards. Until the early 90s, the NCA was just the final rubber stamp following the peer panel recommendations. After the Piss Christ image by Andres Serrano and the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition of gay SM images caused an all-out culture war to erupt, the head of the NEA was no longer to be the final arbiter of grants -- now it would be the 12 people on the NCA, only 2 of which had any idea what contemporary art is.

SIDE BAR:

But why should a government agency fund me for making work about America's soft underbelly? Because a democracy, if it's truly what it holds itself up to be, should be strong enough to withstand scrutiny and internal criticism.

END OF SIDE BAR...

In preparation for the trial (and in my desire to "help the ACLU make their case), I put the combined image of the naked father and sons on the landing page for my website www.degenevieve.com). With the note appearing to the right of the image, the diptych was meant to acknowledge my understanding that the portrait was now a problematic image. This was the perfect example of an artist's work that some might consider

offensive, pornographic, obscene even. (That, of course, is the key word.)

I did get a response from the ACLU lawyers, but not exactly what I had expected. What I got was a rather panicked directive to remove the image from my site. That is, remove it before the next day when the DOJ lawyers were scheduled to view the site, because if they saw it, there was a high probability they would prosecute me. I, of course, was concerned with my own liability and the potential for becoming bankrupt trying to fight a federal court battle, whether I won or not. I had seen it happen several times with other artists. The ACLU however, was more worried about my credibility or even admissability as a witness in their case.

I frantically took down the diptych, imagining my life crumble while the DOJ tore my studio apart and confiscated my computer looking for other incriminating images of naked children. They wouldn't have found any because that was they only image that remained from a series of only three. But the threat of my life and career being destroyed or at least thrown into turmoil was quite sobering.

But my day in court was sweet. From the witness box, I watched the Department of Justice lawyers squirm, one even refusing to look at all, at excerpts from Steven X and Barbara C and the Panhandler Project. For as satisfying as that brief 10 minutes was of screening clips of my work in a federal court room, and for as interesting as the involvement in the trial turned out to be, the sad reality is that the past 20 years of ultra conservative legislation, media manipulation, and culture wars has significantly altered the art that Americans will see far into the future, and has without exaggeration done irreparable damage to the history of art and it's archival resources.

I've spent a lot of time talking about one photograph I made 29 years ago, but that photograph will most likely never be seen in public in my lifetime, except in situations like this. It's the canary in the mine shaft whose death is a warning for all who might be thinking about descending deeper. It's more of the chilling effect. It's a dick thing on so many levels. Is that image obscene? In no way. Would it get me arrested? Probably. Is that censorship? Well, it's not on the website.

With the pieties of the right ringing in one ear and the self-righteousness and hypocrisies of both the art world and academia in the other, I made the decision in 2000 to open an internet porn site with a friend from California. Being artists who both had some experience with censorship made this venture, from the beginning, a political undertaking rather than a business venture. He was the webmaster, I was the content provider, and the models were lesbians, dykes, butches, femmes, trannie boys and gender queers of infinite variation. From January 2001 until February 2004, I shot a scene each week, produced approximately 150 videos and over 13,000 images that were extracted as stills from the videos. The site was www.ssspread.com.

I'll end this presentation with a 19 minute compilation from a 3 year project that changed my life perhaps more than anything else I've done. I assume this group doesn't need to be alerted to the fact that you're about to see explicit depictions of sex.

ssspreload...

Sexual art is at greater risk than pornography in being excluded from the archive of images that make up the contemporary understanding of the body. More people are more likely to see and buy porn, than to see, buy or care about art. Memory is short and without inclusion in some form of an archive outside of the accepted canon, there is no possibility for recollection.

The single place where work can survive most of the exigencies of politics and culture, is the internet, the most comprehensive, and accessible archive ever devised. I do fear it's virtuality and it's dependence on the technology we take for granted, but until we have something to replace it or we experience a global catastrophe I'll put my faith in this most egalitarian, non-discriminatory democratic repository.