

SEX and the NEA

An interview with Barbara DeGenevieve
by Tanya Turkovich

1965: The year Congress created the NEA, it declared:

"It is the intent of the committee that in the administration of this act there be given the fullest attention to freedom of artistic and humanistic expression. One of the artists' and humanists' great values to society is the mirror of self examination which they can raise so that society can become aware of its short comings as well as its strengths." It also stated that funding decisions should be based on the standard of "artistic and humanistic excellence."

1994: On August 5th, NEA grants of Barbara DeGenevieve, Merry Alpern and Andres Serrano, are revoked when the National Council on the Arts (NCA), the advisory, presidentially-appointed arm of the NEA rejects the peer council recommendations for the Photography Fellowships, purportedly due to lack of "artistic excellence."

For the uninitiated: the NEA charter asserts that decisions are to be based solely on the basis of "artistic quality." Artists recommended by the NEA peer council (composed of artists and previous NEA recipients) cannot receive grants without the approval of the NCA. But the NCA (governmentally appointed and therefore vested with different interests) has little basis for making grant decisions.

As Andy Grundberg, chair of the NEA photography panel, reflected in an article for the *Los Angeles Times*, "The council contains no one with a background in photography. They can not debate the status of an artist who is totally unfamiliar to them. Ultimately their decisions come down to two factors: personal taste and politics. Neither belong in the process."

He believes the council's recent actions point to a fundamental flaw in the NEA



© Barbara DeGenevieve

"Untitled (My mind lives in a hot wet hole in my body)."

nificance of her work, and some of the ideas behind her work. She has been an associate professor of Art at San Jose State University, and has also taught at the San Francisco Art Institute and the California College of Arts and Crafts. From 1980-89 she taught at the University of Illinois. In August 1993 she returned to the Midwest to take a tenured position at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has been a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1988), an Illinois Art Council Artist Fellowship (1987) and a William and Flora Hewlett Summer International Research Grant (1987) to study gender representations in European photography. She lectures on a variety of subjects as they relate to her work. In 1991 she curated three exhibitions about male representation and body politics, including *No More Heroes for SF Camerawork*, where she has been a mem-

ber of the Board of Directors since 1990. place at the National Council on the Arts meeting during which the grants were rejected, and two things seem to be happening. On one hand it's obvious that many members of the Council just don't know how to look at contemporary photography, because it's no longer simply about beauty and lulling the viewer into some state of semi-conscious reverie.

On the other hand, they know exactly what it's about, and that is ideas, very disturbing and challenging ideas. So when people aren't willing to go a little farther than what's on the surface, and if what's on the surface doesn't interest them visually, or worse yet, disturbs them in some way, they'll devalue and trivialize it by saying it's lacking in quality.

In Serrano's work, the images are of people in a morgue with titles explaining how each of them died. Image and text combinations can be enormously powerful and I think people don't want demands made on them in terms of art. I demand that people think about sexual pleasure, both mine and theirs. Mary Alpern demands that the viewer consider prostitution in a very elite atmosphere: Wall Street. There we are, the big taboos—death, sex, and prostitution. This stuff is very confrontational, because it demands a certain level of intellectual, emotional, and political engagement—it's not visual candy.

T: One of art's roles is to challenge. What assumptions are you asking people to question?

D: I'm asking people to question their assumptions about female sexuality. They perhaps need to know the context, that I'm in my 40's and I'm representing myself as a sexual being, maybe even objectifying myself, talking in a very explicitly sexual way. And sometimes I'm more interested in insinuation, as in the one where my mouth is open and this big, pink, sequined, "phallic" panel seems to be entering my mouth and the words say, "I want it all." If you just read the words or you just looked at the image there would be no real offense. It's a woman with her mouth open. What does that mean? Which is what I was saying before about the combinatory possibilities of text and image, or image and image, and that the image itself is somewhat neutral until you combine it

with something else.

T: But some of your text moves into the realm of what would be considered pornography.

D: Yeah, so? You want me to comment on that?

T: On why, and how that works with your images and what people, after reading the text, are supposed to come away with. Is arousal one of the objectives?

D: It's more than arousal. And it's not that I'm disinterested in arousal in the text I'm writing, but that I'm more interested in the power relationships and the kind of intellectual games that are going on. I'm interested in creating a scenario which is unexpected for the reader, particularly in terms of their relationship or their reaction to the female character, or the fact that a woman has written this. I'm interested in playing with the parameters of so-called "pornography" because it is an arena from which women have generally been excluded both as writers and as viewers/readers. Erotica has been more the domain of men and pornography; the rough stuff, the domain of men.

Pornography and sexually explicit imagery have their place and it's not on mainstreet. It's set aside in this ostracized sphere, and you enter it at your own risk. I like that aspect of taboo, not only in terms of what pornography is about, but where it exists in the culture. I find it annoying to be excluded from any realm so I've gone to porn shops, with other people at first, and then alone. I talk to the people there and make my presence felt in those shops and...

T: Is that empowering?

D: Yeah, it is.

T: Would you agree that virtually every work of art is bound to offend someone? And if so, how do we change the public's perception of art that may be threatening?

D: I'm interested in what makes all of this work so dangerous that it has to be taken out of the public eye, because it finds its way into the public eye through NEA de-

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it's about FEAR..."**

award-granting process. Unless it is amended or changed, "Two dozen political appointees constituting the NEA will continue to be national arbiters of what art is good enough to be recognized and rewarded." The issue at hand is how artistic quality/excellence is construed and by whom. While the debate appears to surface over questions of artistic excellence (an admittedly contestable category), the ideological stakes implicated while invoking "quality" are not as readily apparent.

I spoke with Barbara DeGenevieve, newly appointed professor of Photography at SAIC at length regarding the recent NEA council rejection of her grant, the sig-

ber of the Board of Directors since 1990.

In her statement regarding the council's decision she states: "In comparison to what we see on TV, in film, and in advertising, the work that is so controversial is extremely mild. Opponents have targeted work that is politically sensitive, not sexually obscene. Religious and governmental agencies despise this kind of work because its critical nature disputes their authority. This battle is not about obscenity... it's about fear..."

DeGenevieve: I've been reading the transcription of the discussion which took

DeGenevieve continued from page 21

funding. If it wasn't rejected not very many people outside the art community would know about it, so in a way it's very exciting that it's been rejected. Through the defunding there is potential for the public to become aware of the issues.

Unfortunately, I think it will depend on how the media plays it, and the media in the past has played down the content of the work and just talked about the politics around it, around the problem of censorship. What I'd like to see is the discussion getting back to what the work is about and why the work was made.

I was saying at the University of Illinois the other day that if the work somehow has a voice attached to it, a particular voice, the voice of the artist, or the face of an artist, it may be more difficult to reject it out of hand because there's a real person associated with it. So I'm somewhat hopeful that this incident will become more public and a forum for discussion will be created.

It's the fear of the real, whether it's death on the streets as in Serrano's work, or the sex business in Merry Alpern's case, or female sexuality in my work. These images of contemporary American life are so disturbing that a governmental agency believes that in denying their reality, they can continue to veil their existence. We live in a culture that does its best to cover up its dark secrets with sentimentality and kitsch...

What the NEA wants is art that diverts

attention from real issues, and when it sees work that screams and demands a reckoning, it either calls it deviant, or even more damaging, just bad art.

T: What do you fear that you can't control?

D: My body. Aging. There's no real control there, only deferment.

T: Does your work explore those fears? You're asking people to confront their fears so I'm assuming you're willing to do the same...

D: To a great extent I do. I have to confront fear in my daily life so I do confront it in the work. I don't see a lot of middle-age women talking about sexuality in the way I am, and I think it's the fear of being erased by the culture if we don't talk about the intensity of the sexuality that is part of women's lives.

My fear is of being silenced, being erased, not being seen for who and what I am as I age.

...So much of this is connected to my mother's death and not wanting to die the way that she did. She denied so much of herself, she denied her sexuality, she denied any possibilities in her life that would move her beyond where she was. And I can understand that when you grow up under certain sets of circumstances that are con-

finer or controlled by class, you don't always see yourself as having a lot of options. I think that's how she perceived her life, as not being very rich in possibilities, and that the aging process was taking away her visibility as a woman and in her own mind as a sexual being.

T: Are you still living with the legacy that your mother left you?

D: Yes, absolutely, it's a constant struggle. But I can transcend it in my work. I look back on my work and there's always been a sexual component to it. In the very early work it was about nudity. Now it's much more about gender and sexuality. And no matter what period of my work you're talking about, that aspect of sexuality became transgressive. It's always what's pushed people's buttons, pushed my mother's buttons...what wasn't allowed.

What I'm really interested in doing in this work is—and this may be somewhat arrogant for me to say—to somehow change a representational system that is abusive to me, to most women and that is a representational system that does not acknowledge the fact that we all get older and that we remain sexual beings throughout our lives. The cult of youth is a denial that there is an aging process, and that sexuality does continue after you reach 45. That we're conditioned culturally to look at

ourselves as being over the hill at a certain period of time is not only absurd but damaging.

I think attitudes are slowly changing and I'm really trying to combat these anachronistic notions of aging because I want to live a full and rich life. With my mother as a model, that's difficult to do, so I have to make my own model. I have to create something for myself that I can feel comfortable with and enjoy. I believe we can invent new realities through the language and images we produce and surround ourselves with. Culture fabricates its own reality, its own historical specificity.

Ever since I was in graduate school, I have been very influenced by feminist rhetoric around pornography and sexual imagery. I've spent 12 years of my life writing and thinking about how men control the representational system and the way women were represented. Men didn't seem to be represented in nearly as violent a way, abusive a way, sentimental a way as women are represented, and I found that very difficult to reconcile. I don't think that I would contradict a lot of what I felt and wrote about from 1977 to 1988, but my change in attitude has come in looking at those things in a different way. You can see with a whole new perspective if you stand in an unfamiliar place or look at the issue with another pair of glasses.



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