

**Statement by
Merry Alpern**

**Regarding the Action by
the National Council on
the Arts**

I am distressed by the decision of the National Council on the Arts.

In 1993 and 1994 I photographed after hours from a vantage point off Wall Street in New York City. In a window concealed from street view, male patrons and the women employed at a strip club engaged in drug use and sexual transactions.*

Art is a reflection of society. The pictures submitted to the NEA (from this body of work) are real. My subjects are not actors, I am not a director, and the photographs reveal behavior which can be considered disturbing on many levels. I do not advocate nor do my pictures glorify these acts. My work is neither erotic nor pornographic. In the traditional documentary sense I am an observer, with the same means to record what is in front of me for others to see after the fact. The intent of my pictures is to provoke thought, raise questions and act as a catalyst for discussion.

The NEA Visual Artists peer panel recognized the social truth reflected in my work and recommended me for a fellowship. The action of the National Council on the Arts to overturn this grant is an attempt to deny the factual realities contained in the work and to suppress and intimidate my vision.

* A group of photographs from this series was recently selected for acquisition by the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

Merry Alpern is a photographer living and working in New York City. Alpern is also an instructor at the International Center of Photography. Her work has been included in exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art (NYC) in "More Than One Photography: Works Since 1980 from the Collection" in 1992; and "Recent Acquisitions" in 1991. Her work was also featured in solo exhibition entitled "A.J. and Jim Bob" in 1989 at The Camera Club in New York City. Alpern has been the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1990); and the Leica Medal of Excellence (1988). She is a graduate of Grinnell College (Iowa) with a degree in Sociology.

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Barbara DeGenevieve

Regarding Action by the National Council on the Arts

I am angered and disappointed by this decision. What I find most distressing is the fact that non-traditional ideas can be so intimidating. One of the functions of art is to challenge and possibly disturb what we might otherwise take for granted. It should be the role of the NEA to support work no matter how controversial, which has been determined by the peer review process to meet the criterion of artistic excellence. The cultural production of artists is equivalent to basic research in the sciences and must be funded so that knowledge, consciousness, and perception can continue to expand.

There is nothing that should be legislated out of public consciousness, because there are many things that need to be exposed to critical scrutiny. The debate that can occur in regard to this kind of inquiry is healthy. Art is an active arena. Art has the ability to remind us that there are no answers and no hard and fast rules; that 'reality' and 'morality' are not timeless givens but historically specific human constructions. Art is a place where the struggle of language and image can be acted out. It is a place where questions are asked.

It is the person who asks questions who is the greatest threat to the status quo because questions create doubt. A question is like a knife that slices through the screen and gives us a look at what lies behind it. In the last five years of NEA funding controversies, the work that has been so controversial has done just that - it has asked questions. It has cut through the veil of the sentimental clichés of patriotism, religion, traditional family values, and compulsory heterosexual sexuality, to reveal rich and diverse counter narratives - those which give a voice to life styles and beliefs usually on the fringes of sanctioned cultural production.

From the beginning, the controversy has centered on photography and performance - the two media with the greatest potential for veracity. Artists using these forms have presented challenges to a system of inflexible values created in a heterosexist and Eurocentric tradition. Anything that provokes so fundamentally and so aggressively the foundations of such a powerful system will of course be open to self-righteous and unscrupulous attack. 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 - none of our images are what can remotely be considered obscene. This battle is about fear - the fear of the realness of human experience. It's also about representation and meaning and who will control access to knowledge.

I am 47 years old. I live in a culture that does its best to deny women a sense of their sexuality and agency, particularly as they get older. Nine years ago, at the age of 62, my mother committed suicide. She perceived herself as being powerless and increasingly invisible. She did not have access to certain kinds of knowledge - she was working class, uneducated, and unaware of her options. I am not. My refusal in this body of work to be the good girl my mother struggled all her life to be is my refusal to die as she did. I believe the culture which now surrounds us is incapable of expressing the complexities of women's lives, of their sexualities, their gender orientations, their desires and pleasures. I believe images and words can change people and as an artist I use both in an attempt to alter cultural perceptions.

Barbara DeGenevieve is an artist whose work currently deals with the exigencies of female desire and pleasure. In August she returned to the midwest to take a tenured position at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Since 1989 she was Associate Professor of Art at San Jose State University, and 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. DeGenevieve has been a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artists Fellowship (1988), an Illinois Arts Council Artists Fellowship (1987), and a William and Flora Hewlett Summer International Research Grant (1987) to study gender representation in European photography. She lectures widely on her work as well contemporary women photographers, censorship and artist's responsibility, and the representation of sexuality, gender, and pornography. In 1991 she curated three exhibitions about male representation and body politics, including "No More Heroes" for SF Camerawork, where she has been a member of the Board of Directors since 1990.