

YAWN is a sporadic communiqué which seeks to provide a critical look at our culture in all its manifestations. We welcome responses from readers, especially observations of a critical nature. Be forewarned that anything sent may be considered for inclusion in a future issue without specific prior notification. Submissions are welcome and encouraged. It is our policy not to attribute work, unless the content benefits from such attribution. **YAWN** is a collective, mostly anonymous, effort. Contributors receive a copy of the **YAWN** in which their work is used. Monetary donations are requested to help defray the costs of publication. Subscriptions are available for \$10 (cash or unused stamps) for 25 issues. Archive at <http://yawn.detritus.net/>.

The Oblique Film of Experts

The recent decision in the Mapplethorpe case involving the Contemporary Arts Center and its director, Dennis Barrie, raises important questions regarding the status of art in our society. The decision of the jury to acquit the director of the museum was based on a distinction between Art and pornography which highlights the very relationship of Art to a culture-at-large which the Art Strike, and **YAWN**, seek to question. To find the museum innocent based on such a distinction only further entrenches the status of Artist as privileged creator of culture; of the *objet d'Art* as relic, as fetish.

However, this clearly was not the only, or even most important, issue in the case. There were also closely associated, perhaps really enmeshed, questions of censorship. The jury's decision to acquit suggests that because an object or idea can be defined as having artistic value, it may be exempted from "community"-based standards of censorship. The question that comes to mind is how do we know such an object is art? How do we know that the objects created by an artist have value? And, is it relevant, even self-limiting, to make distinctions based on the notion that one mode of production is somehow inherently more valuable than another?

The question is not whether such a category as Art exists. It does. There can really be little doubt as to this. It is the nature and function of this category that is in question when we start to look at whether an object belongs to that category and what that means, both for artists and non-artists.

Art is a kind of cultural dialect. It is a system of received signs, syntax and assumptions by which any object, act, or idea may be recognized, and thus invested with meaning—as Art. In capitalizing the 'A' in art, I want to refer to a kind of "received pronunciation"—a standard dialect of art.

Art is, then, the meaning put into an ordered system of these signs. This meaning is, at base, a function of the context in which these signs are "read." This context can include not only the physical locality in which the object is placed, but also the environment of assumptions which exist before an object may ever be made. These assumptions include that one is an artist or that one is making art. It is the same for an autoworker. Her assumptions may be that she is a worker, or perhaps an artist. Each description of the action, the creative effort, carries with it a separate set of valuations of the end product, of the actions themselves. This set of values and meanings are, of course, culturally determined and arbitrarily related to the object or action. Moreover, there is no *essential* meaning, only a shifting set of signs

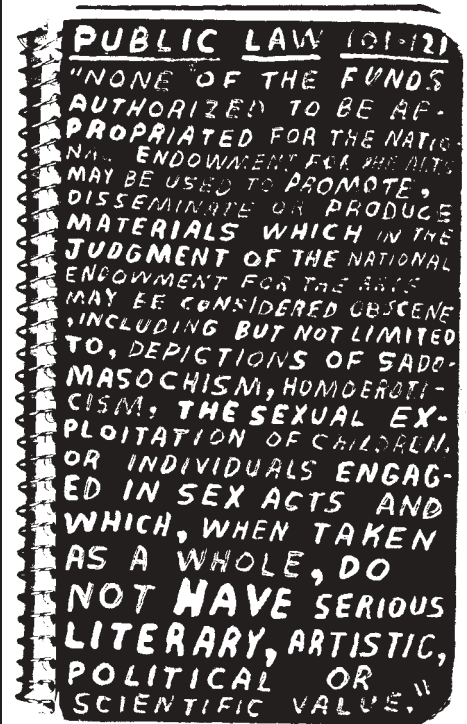
and contexts which allow for any number of "readings," an underlying structure whose reflections shift from viewer to viewer, situation to situation, limited only by the historical context it is perceived in.

For some, many Art Strikers in particular, Art is also part of a spectacular and indispensable decoration of estranged culture. As Art distracts us through its fashion and theory, it misdirects our gaze from the underlying alienation of our lives from the very culture it covers, an apparently seamless curtain. It creates a surface we no longer understand and are not allowed to touch. This oblique film is now in the realm of the Artist and the Expert. It is owned and controlled as intellectual and cultural property.

The jury in the Mapplethorpe case in Cincinnati found that the photographs in question, (7 out of the 175 that were in the exhibit), were obscene, appealed to prurient interests, but in fact did have artistic value, thus meeting only 2 of the 3 legal standards for pornography. This decision was reached after a series of experts testified to the artistic worth of the works. The fact is, the photographs were Art before they were ever made. That Mapplethorpe was considered to be an artist, that his works had appeared in venues where Art is displayed, that his works have been discussed as Art, all lead to the presupposition that the images in question are Art. To find the gallery innocent based on these assumptions only further mystifies the creative process; only further removes any element of creativity from a non-artist's actions in the world. "I'm not an expert," says warehouse manager and juror James Jones, "I don't understand Picasso's art. But I assume the people who call it art know what they are talking about." The curtain has been closed. We are neither experts nor priests. We must now depend upon a kind of cleric, an artist or critic, to intercede between us and the creative world.

The question as to whether a work, or idea, or product is Art or pornography is itself a kind of censorship. To call one person an Artist is to deny another's creativity. But, where do we draw the line? We cannot escape censorship on some level. Perhaps, instead of asking whether a work is obscene or prurient, we need to ask if it is harmfully exploitive. As such, I am not disagreeing with the jury's verdict. I am disagreeing with the subtle and mostly very subjective distinctions that their decision is based on. These distinctions are, at best, academic. At worst, they answer questions for us, shielding us from cultural realities and controversies that we have now relegated to the luminiferous ether of academia.

—Ralph Johnson, Iowa City, October 1990



CENSORSHIP: A RANT

I want to keep this brief because in all the recent months of anti-censorship activities, amongst all the talk, amidst all the articles, & letter writings, etc., there's been a noticeable lack of what I would consider one of the most important ingredients in this battle: visual propaganda.

As far as I'm concerned, and in relation to my own visual art practice, the xerox machine is one of the most powerful weapons we as artists have available to us in the fight against censorship. It's cheap, quick and accessible.

Much of what I will be addressing has the xerox machine in mind and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Chester Carlson, the inventor of xerography, for inventing this revolutionary process.

BLAST

Blast all artists who still buy into the myth of artistic genius and the whole ideological baggage that goes with it and who don't see how it serves to separate and divide us at precisely the time when we should be throwing all that crap out the window.

Blast artists until they finally put away their egos along with their crumbling portfolios and realize that collective and collaborative action in

C E N S O R S H I P :

T H E D I C T A T O R S H I P O F T H E S E N S E S

the defense of cultural diversity brings with it a far greater personal satisfaction than any one-person exhibit.

Blast this museum for not taking a public stand on these issues & for organizing this series so late in the year that the fate of the NEA is now completely out of our hands (a post-mortem perspective as it were).

Blast this museum and the sign that tells me what I *cannot* do as soon as I walk in the door (DO NOT TOUCH THE ART).

Blast the apathy and inferiority complexes of Iowa City artists for not organizing any actions around these attacks on their rights of freedom of expression.

Blast (with one exception) the inactivity of this whole academic community in responding to Jesse Helms' attacks on what you ultimately might or might not be able to see, hear and read.

Blast all artists who refuse to see that the Cold War has really come home. How many painters, photographers, musicians & arts administrators have to be strangled by the legal system for artists to realize that it's their front door which could be the next one to be kicked in.

Blast all the artists who have accepted NEA handouts, signed the Helms' amendment, and thereby compromised their work and reputations. You will not be forgotten.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Just because 2 Live Crew and Dennis Barry were acquitted doesn't mean we can rest on our laurels, for you can bet the right wing aren't sitting around on their butts. So, if I was cultural czar I would declare a war for culture and I'd

call it "1000 Points of Propaganda." And these are some of the things that I would want to do.

First of all we need to take a large leaf out of the right wings' methods of operation: we need national organizing, national coordination and we need to compile the biggest fucking computerized mailing list in the world.

We need to create a network of "art against censorship" xerox image-banks that could serve as distribution centers across the country; places where artists could send copies of their work which in turn would get distributed to other anti-censorship groups, publications, etc.

Forget about all the old political art cliches in this new propaganda, mix it up, plagiarize, recombine, appropriate, do whatever is necessary to catch people's attention, infuriate them, inundate them, assault their senses.

Set up a local Iowa City branch of the National Campaign for the Freedom of Expression (P.O. Box 50245, F Street, Washington, DC 20004.

We need to set up 'propaganda workshops' where visual materials etc. would be provided, and people could come together for an evening to create, party and then xerox the whole lot and

hit the streets the same evening. This work could then be exchanged and distributed to other such workshops throughout the country.

Put together a xerox booklet with images and text entitled "How To Answer 20 of the Most Difficult and Awkward Questions About Government Funding For the Arts." Something that would inform people in a straightforward way about the complex issues in this debate and facilitate them in countering the rights' arguments. Xerox in the 1000s, distribute and encourage people to modify and recopy.

Set up decentralized 'propaganda combat units' that can quickly mount a cultural response to local and national incidents of censorship (Boy/Girl Akimbo of San Francisco and ACT-UP have created useful models).

Explore the potential and use in new ways all the other available duplicative technologies in this cultural offensive: fax, computers, modems, video, etc.

Finally, I would declare an all-out overt war who's slogan would be: *Artists The New Freedom Fighters: As Nasty We Wanna Be!*

—Stephen Perkins, Iowa City, October, 1990



Speak nothing



See nothing



Hear nothing

No Federal Culture

This "NEA Controversy" that has "everyone" in an uproar can be seen in several lights—not all of which will be found very useful in the broader project of liberating expression of all kinds, indeed all human activity, from imposed orthodoxy; and furthermore, in the dismantling of the capitalist apparatus itself.

The most usual way to see this "controversy" is to see it as censorship. That this is *not* the case eludes many people, especially those who would attract to themselves a certain prestige: the prestige of the oppressed. There is no censorship involved in the "NEA Controversy." The word "freedom" suggests that cultural workers must use their own resources to avoid the stricture of external control. That these resources are distributed in an unegalitarian way is the real problem, and it won't go away until the problem is confronted and the dominant capitalist system is dismantled.

Over-reliance on government subsidy has always yielded disastrous

results. Such subsidies only serve to increase the intrusive impulse of hierarchical power. This fact, given the current debate, should be obvious.

The real danger is that any cultural worker who accepts NEA grant money by definition becomes part of an Official Federal Culture controlled from Washington. The more "acceptable" to this Federal Culture a cultural worker tries to make her work appear (in an effort to get more grants) the more powerful this Federal Culture becomes. Pre-censorship pre-empts and empties the work of vital content and relevance. Why should anyone want to seek the approval of a panel of "experts"? This is surely not what it means to have freedom.

What we've seen with this "NEA Controversy" is an *overt* attempt to strengthen Federal Culture through the method of forcing cultural workers to sign affidavits guaranteeing certain content in their future work. This is an instance of an effective plutocracy imposing self-censorship on its own people. We should be thankful that it is finally out in the open, where it can be vigorously discussed, and actively opposed by all cultural workers of conscience.

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