

ISSUES OF CENSORSHIP

By Gillian McCain

To get rid of censorship brings no freedom, only the awareness of real lack of freedom.

—John Greyson, a Toronto video artist.

On May 31, 1984, after two weeks of pressure from the Ontario Censor Board, two government officials from the Board seized video tapes and equipment from A Space, an artist-run art center in Toronto. There were no warrants served or charges laid. After a considerable amount of defiance from A Space the tapes were returned without penalty. The Ontario court then ruled against the Censor Board and succeeded in placing restrictions on the Board's power of confiscation.

This incident was an isolated one but it inspired such Toronto artists and writers as Varda Burstyn, Lynne Fernie, Vera Frenkel, John Greyson, Gary Kibbins, Peter Greyson, Stan Denniston, Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak to put their thoughts into art work to further enlighten the art community and public on the issue of censorship. One year following the confiscation incident at A Space the center presented the exhibition "Issues of Censorship" which was recently shown at Halifax Centre for Art Tapes.

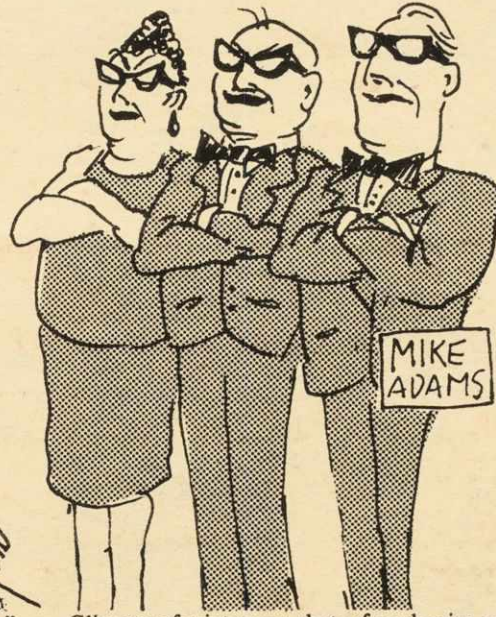
In the concurrent publication from the exhibition, A Space committee member Jim Miller states, "an underlying but central concern dealt with in this publication is that of representation. It is approached by the artists and writers both as a question of political representation (who and what were made absent from our culture and for what reasons), and as well as a question of imagistic representation, (how do photographs, parables, paintings and other mediation depict people, things and aspects of social life?)"

One of the issues brought out in John Greyson's art work is that of sexual representation. When Greyson hears people talk about porn, he thinks of knitting. When living in New York, the only job he could get was one at Modernismo Publications as a typesetter. Modernismo publishes primarily porn magazines (both straight and gay) and a knitting magazine. In the introduction to his work in the exhibition catalogue, Greyson notes that feminists protest about the sexual degradation in such Modernismo Publications as 'Jugs' and 'Legshow' but only the gay porn magazines have their pages ripped out by Canadian Customs before they even reach this country. And as John Greyson says, "Meanwhile, the knitting magazine, which certainly stereotypes and degrades women in a far more subtle way than 'Legshow', enjoys mass circulation, untouched by any criticism."

Greyson's art piece, 'Babar Porn', explores issues such as homosexual stereotyping and how pornography is utilized by the state and the industries to reap profits from someone else's free speech. "Individuals made the drawings, took the pictures, but the market place wrote the texts and ensured their mass distribution." Through cartoon drawings of Babar (the elephant character from children's books) and a homosexual elephant friend, Greyson tells the story of how the government encourages writers and small publishers with government incentive grants, then censors the controversial work, thus causing increased publicity, higher sales, and profits from the resulting productions.

The artist proves this point by a series of graphics showing pages from an imaginary book called *Babar and Sex Education* and comments made by two elementary school teachers who act as narrators in the piece. While looking through the book one of the teachers comments, "I don't know about this book for our grade two class... it's not like the other Babar books..." and the other replies, "Well, it was published with one of those government incentive grants... You know, helps make small publishers more commercial..."

When the pages display a scene that would automatically be labelled as pornography, the teachers have the following dialogue. "Oh, I see... Babar and his friend are turned into two old men,



and escape on wheelchairs to a bathroom..." and the reply, "I think the author was trying to challenge dominant stereotypes of old people..."

The viewer then realizes what many artists and writers are going through; even though they are providing relevant social commentary, their work is labelled pornography (and thus censored) because sex is involved.

The next drawing is that of the cover of the *Globe and Mail* with the headline, "Porn Seized From School, Teachers Charged" with the teachers again, this time discussing the incident in the past tense. "Remember the court case? The publishers sure did well..." The book was a bestseller... and the reply, "... and all the spin-offs... sex toys, bedsheets, teapots, wallpaper... Meanwhile, we can't find any new jobs..." As John Greyson says in his prologue, "To get rid of censorship is to pull back, to refocus, to expose the whole picture — the vulgar mechanics of a magnificent, mixed-up and not-so-subtle machine called oppression."

Gary Kibbins' pseudo-propaganda poster "Civil liberties... We're Keeping an Eye on Them" is a sardonic and biting stab toward the federal government. With the byline "a message from The Ruling Class", the tone is one of cutting sarcasm degrading how the Powers of the country shape citizens' awareness or unawareness of certain issues. "We are continuing our practice of barring from the mass media all viewpoints which are foreign or threatening to our way of life..."

We are taking advantage of the current alarm over the spread of pornography. It supports our efforts to stamp out the real threat to our way of life: critiques of sexism, critiques of heterosexism, and alternatives to pornography." Through his work Kibbins stresses that censorship is present in society because the ideas that are banned are ones that threaten present "ruling class" ideals.

In her slide show "The Making of a Photographer", Frenkel again explores the collusion of the pornographer and the censor. For censor "what is clean and what is dirty is according to the state rules." Pain, murder, starvation and plague are permissible to the censor as long as no physical functions like sexual intercourse are shown. And if the artist continually has his work censored they will be forced to "go underground where sex belongs and become a pornographer." The analogy and the text is effective in getting its point across but the accompanying slides are inept in giving the viewer any real information.

Glimpses of printrooms, shots of greek ruins, and beach scenes are all very pretty but it is difficult relating the images back to the text. And the text is so well-written and narrated that the viewer tends to semi-ignore the slides and concentrate on the words being spoken.

As an anonymous woman said in Lisa Steele's and Kim Tomczak's videotape *See Evil*, "remember, things get worse before they get better." This may or may not be true. In April of this year groups and individuals concerned with the rising increase in censorship banded together to organize the "Ontario Open Screenings, Six Days of Resistance Against the Censor Board." It consisted of 120 hours of film and tape (that had been neither seen nor approved by the censor board) shown in eleven different cities.

As Kerri Kwinter wrote in the exhibition catalogue, "Six Days of Resistance Against the Ontario Censor Board" was a popular and political success. Ontario screens are open. Feminists, artists and community groups can continue to conduct their business as they always have. If the board and government is serious in their concern about violence, misogyny and hate they will have to find new and effective ways to deal with these problems — ways that work and ways that do not threaten the freedom and power of the people that they purport to protect." With the help and support from the people involved in "Six Days of Resistance" and the "Issues of Censorship" exhibition, the government apparatus of censorship may have a difficult time staying alive.

Lynn Fernie deals with an entirely different form of censorship: Self-censorship. Her art piece, 'Altering Images' deals with anorexia nervosa, the self-starvation disease. In her work, Fernie describes in seven images the self-condemnation the anorexic suffers. "The mirror in her bedroom became an eye; Jehovah was in the mirror and the mirror reflected the world." The mirror becomes the judge of self-worth and the reflection the ideals of society. Fernie says, "When we became friends, she told me, 'No matter how well I did, I felt I was leading a fake life — always in fear of falling.' We looked at each other, knew we had been standing in a city of shadows."

The fake life the anorexic describes is one that has been fabricated by the perverted cultural and social ideals of society. It is 'fake' because the women's ideal concept of self does not come from within but from such external references as

advertising, television, magazines and movies. The media represents women as semi-emaciated so that women will censor themselves into thinking that if they are not as skinny as a magazine model they they are inadequate and unable to control their own bodies.

If women are brainwashed into believing that they are failures because they cannot control something as elementary and life-supporting as food, they cannot possibly gather enough courage to try controlling more important aspects of their lives. When women are forever trying to improve their bodies by self-censoring (and thus stamp out their inadequacy) they are not going to be able to devote much time to improving their minds and thus conclude that they are being ultimately oppressed.

With political art the meaning should be reasonably clear without the viewer having to lose themselves in a mass of abstractions. This is not the case with Stan Denniston's "Making Pictures IV & V".

In "Making Pictures IV" the intent is clear: this issue is that concerning censorship in photography (in this case pertaining to governmental activities). His piece superimposes text over photographs, presumably of events described in the text. The text is suggestive of the urgency at the scene: "glimpse from the highway... a gauntlet of dated missiles... stopping the car forbidden... forgetting... administered forgetting — turn back — what is this display for... a triumphal entrance to a top security missile testing installation... am forbidden to photograph — U turn — hard to steady this lens... who's this on my tail... did they spot me making a turn... or my appearance at the gate... front seat full of camera gear".

In both pieces the photographs are inefficient in collaborating with the text to help the viewer come to any understanding of the work. In "Making Pictures V" the content and meaning is ambiguous. What has a convoy of trucks got to do with anything? Why are there two people chasing it? Why do they want a picture of it? Is there any connection between the first image and this one? All of these questions are left unanswered.

Peter Greyson's "Speech Uttered at the Collision of Opposing Views" is a much more lucid piece of work than Denniston's and therefore has a more powerful impact. "The piece was based on the experience of being repeatedly strip searched while serving a 90 day sentence for protesting cruise missile testing by pouring paint on the Canadian Constitution," says Greyson in the exhibition catalogue. Not only does it raise questions concerning the validity of the phrase 'freedom of speech', but it also acts as an enlightener concerning the maltreatment of prisoners in Canadian prisons.

Probably the easiest art piece to disregard is Robert Wien's "The Artist, The Camera and The Audience". Visually it is attractive (a photocolage divided into small sections by steel), but the message of the image is obscured by the divisions. And although the caption "allowed to Sow, Forbidden To Reap" is relevant, it is difficult to read below the surface. That the artists are allowed to create the work but then are forbidden to present it to an audience is indeed pertinent to the issues of censorship but where the other artists delved into a number of topics in their work, Wien did not.

Vera Frenkel's short parables "The Art of Denial/The Practice of Pain" explore "the truly beneficial relationship between masters of pornography, masters of censorship, master races, theft, and the state." Her tone is caustic and her criticism sarcastic. "Pornography is the place where pain is disguised as pleasure. Censorship is the place where pleasure is disguised as pain." She describes the relationship between the pornographer and the censor as a "strange and clumsy mating... They are in business together, the business of frightened desires. They provide first the form, then the punishment. P. & C. Remember their name. They're a team."