

Censor Your Art, Censor Your Life

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Earlier this summer I had one of those unexpected, mind-jabbing conversations that are my lifeblood, the kind that wakes me out of my usual Flint numbness. Gary Custer and I were talking about the flag burning issue, and how the First Amendment gets trampled. A point he made that hit home for me was how odd it is that all sorts of things that are illegal, like murder, rape, stealing, or drug dealing, are OK to depict in movies, TV, books. Things that are quite legal and much more natural, namely sexual intercourse, are not OK to depict. I savored this notion, this new-found irony.

My own irony was that I hedged on offering how his idea applied to me. I'd only just met Mr. Custer and, although I'm fairly open, I've learned to be careful about disclosing one personal detail about myself, even to seemingly liberal folk. It's like having a solo exhibit of paintings with the most intimate and beautiful one draped, to be shown only to select, trusted individuals (if at all). It was an everyday event, to censor my life.

Homosexuality has been a target of censorship for as long as there has been censorship. Same-sex love was largely invisible, kept that way, until the 20th century. Since 1900, the year of Oscar Wilde's death, examples of the repression of any art, any literature, dealing with homosexual feelings and activities, not to mention the feelings and activities themselves, have abounded.

The targets have spanned every medium, from novels to poetry, from theater to films, from paintings to photography. In 1929 Radclyffe Hall's lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* was banned in New York; the judge said it was "worse than throwing acid in a young person's eyes." Thirty years later, copies of Allen Ginsburg's *Howl* were confiscated from City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco as obscene. When Mae West announced in 1927 that she would stage a homosexual comedy she was arrested for public indecency. In 1930 the Motion Picture Code instituted its prohibition on "depictions or inferences of sex perversion" that would last more than three decades. During the Depression "The Fleet's In" by Paul Cadmus was excluded from a showing of WPA paintings. Three magazines which featured photographs of male physiques were banned from the U.S. mails in 1962 on grounds they appealed solely to the "prurient interests" of "sex deviates."

Even though these efforts at censorship were each eventually foiled, they sent a clear and chilling message. Homosexual ideas, emotions, and behavior were reprehensibly taboo, and the people who had them were sinners, criminals, and sickos. It was the condition that dared not be mentioned, in or out of art.

In many ways it still dares not be mentioned. The forces driving such censorship continue to pervade our culture. In recent years, particularly since the emergence of acquired immune deficiency syndrome, efforts to censor anything to do with lesbians and gays have escalated.

Decrying that tax dollars were being spent to advocate sodomy, Senator Jesse Helms in July 1988 railed in Congress against an explicit safe-sex comicbook issued by Gay Men's Health Crisis, an organization which had received some government funding for its programs. Though the comic itself was not produced with federal monies, Helms used it to sway his colleagues to curtail AIDS education funds that "promote" homosexuality. The effect was to seriously restrict knowledge of the disease from an audience that most needed it. Some people do not know the polite terminology for things sexual, but according to the Helms attitude, if people do not know what

"protected anal intercourse" is, or if they only know the street language for it, let them die.

Meanwhile in Great Britain, Margaret Thatcher pushed even harsher legislation through Parliament. Clause 28 made it illegal for local governments to take *any* measures, including subsidizing art, that "intentionally promote homosexuality" or even imply that lesbian and gay relationships might be normal. In the atmosphere of hostility this established, books were banned, plays were cancelled, and "poof" and "poofster" were deemed by the Press Council to be "acceptable journalistic synonyms" for gay males. Aside from smearing a whole group of people, Clause 28, by its vagueness, was an invitation to abuses. Some feared that since Shakespeare penned several of his sonnets to a young man, would the bard be banned in Britain?

Last October a state representative sought to prevent a production at Southwest Missouri State University of "The Normal Heart" by Larry Kramer. The lawmaker, a Republican named Jean Dixon, said that the play, which deals with gay men and AIDS, had no place at a public institution. Among those who protested a ban was actress Kathleen Turner, an alumna of the school. "One should have access to any and all information," she said. "To withhold information is tyranny." Backers eventually affirmed their right to stage the play, but one student supporter had his home torched on opening night.

Another instance of government attacking AIDS art as gay propaganda occurred this summer when several officials opposed the display of a prize-winning safe sex poster. This poster, showing a man and woman kissing, two men kissing and two women kissing, was accused by a city councilman of being "directed at children for the purpose of recruitment." Efforts are underway in the Illinois legislature to prohibit images of same-sex contact from public view. The controversial poster read "Kissing doesn't kill. Greed and indifference do." They might add that ignorance and bigotry kill, too.

The anti-gay censors had their biggest impact, however, when the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, fearing it would jeopardize funding for the National Endowment for the Arts, cancelled an exhibit of photographs by the late Robert

Mapplethorpe, the same exhibit recently tried for obscenity in Cincinnati. The concern was over a handful of sado-masochistic, homoerotic and interracial images (included in the show at his insistence; they were part of his whole vision as an artist, part of what he had to say) among his breathtaking portraits and still-lives. Instead of forestalling the wrath of Congress, the cancellation hastened it. Soon Senator Helms was again at his pulpit, engineering the first Congressionally mandated restrictions on artistic content in the 25 year history of the NEA.

One of the key restrictions on the NEA was that "homoerotic" art - "hetero-erotic" art wasn't mentioned - could not receive federal funds. It was another clear and deliberate attack directed at lesbians and gays. But how would they decide what was homoerotic? Show every proposal to a "homo" to see if he/she would get aroused? Or maybe Jesse himself would be the judge.

The chill of this censorship was almost immediately felt. Four performance artists, who were recommended for funding by the peer panel that grants fellowships, had their money revoked by John Frohnmayer, the chair of the NEA himself, because their work deals with the politics of sexuality. Their art was too graphic. It was too honest.

Art is supposed to be honest. It is supposed to make people think, to enlighten them to other experiences. Otherwise it isn't art; its the same old tripe we're fed to keep us occupied or make us buy something. Then why should an artist bother?

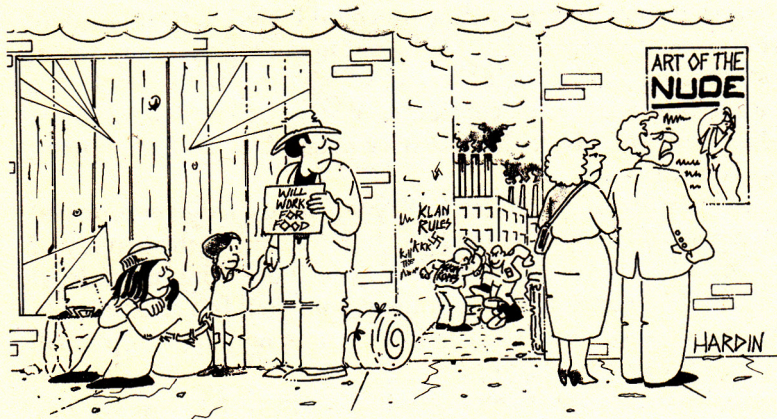
The lesbian and gay press is currently in panic over what will be considered homoerotic. Individual artists fear that because they are homosexual and open about it, some judge will detect homoerotic content in whatever they produce. At the insistence of the censor, they purge their art of all that gives it real meaning.

Censorship is a method of control. Censors want to "protect" us, protect all of us, from some truth. Whereas art selects and filters in an effort to find truth, censorship denies and perverts it. Censorship lies about the world. Like creationists ignoring a skull of homo erectus, the censors want to deny lesbian and gay expression. They feel that if they can squelch the art, they squelch the reality.

Too often the oppression works. The reality gets squelched. People who are lesbian and gay self-censor their very lives. They hide their affections, they hide their desires, they hide their love. There can be harsh consequences if they don't: loss of job, home, family, insurance, life. It is called being in the closet, and the vast majority of homosexual people in this country hide behind a closet door. They disguise themselves. They wear a mask so no one will condemn them, so no one will hate them for who they are.

Fortunately many people can and do stop hiding. Since 1969, when the modern liberation movement began, coming out has been an act of peaceful disobedience against censorship. Outing is the latest, albeit extreme effort to demand the truth, to end the silence. Invisibility has allowed thousands of people to destroy themselves through substance abuse, and countless more to die from AIDS. It is no accident that the battle cry of ACT UP is "Silence=Death."

Meanwhile in Flint most of the lesbian and gay population remains invisible and silent. Even those who are open are not very open. And why not? The costs are enormous



"Disgusting"

here. If underwear brings shrieks of outrage in a bank lobby display, no one would dare to bronze a jockstrap in Flint.

Whatever overtly lesbian or gay art that appears locally is usually imported. So we're glad when the movie "Torch Song Trilogy" plays here for a week. We celebrate the paltry lesbian and gay section at Young & Welshans, the only bookstore in the area that even carries our books. And we're so very grateful when Peter Marshall brings "La Cage Aux Folles" to Whiting Auditorium.

The unavailability of lesbian and gay art in Flint is sad because art is essential to human understanding. Art can show what it's like to wonder if there's anybody else in the world who feels like you do. Art can show how it feels to be wildly attracted to a guy and at the same time be scared he'll beat the shit out of you if he finds out. Art comes closest to capturing love.

Anti-gay censorship and prejudice has directly affected the creative efforts I pursue. As a co-editor of *Kwasind*, the literary magazine at UM-Flint (plug), I'd hesitate in selecting an openly gay submission. It would have to be really good. Even then, I'd probably defer the decision to Bob Bement, the other (straight) co-editor.

I'm hyper-conscious every time I go to write something. When I pick up a pen I have to decide if I'll allow my desires and dreams to show through. How much do I want to really explore what is basic to my being? Do I want to get tagged a gay writer and be delegated to one of several ghettos in the bookstore stacks? Do I want to be considered one-sided? Do I want to get called (ack) an activist? It's like it's a major decision to stop lying for one measly second.

Earlier this summer a Wayne County judge overturned Michigan's sodomy law, the first step in securing the privacy of lesbian and gay sexual activity. It's one more thing that's legal but not OK to depict. This was the point I couldn't contribute to the conversation with Gary Custer. It was nothing exceptional, but was it worth concealing?

With all the current fury about censorship and art, I've heard many people, rightly, talk about how "chilling" it is. Lesbians and gays know about the chilling effect of censorship. We live with it every day.