



Editorial: Culture Wars

Terry Barrett

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Editorial

Culture Wars¹

Sniper Attacks.

While preparing for a presentation about controversial art for the 1994 NAEA Baltimore convention, my Dean informed me that an anonymous woman had complained to the Child Pornography Division of the Columbus Police Department that child pornography was being displayed in the art building. She was referring to contemporary photographs mounted under Plexiglas alongside art historical reproductions in a second floor hallway. The display was for an art education course I teach called Writing Art Criticism. The photographs are by Sally Mann (1993) from her book *Immediate Family*—photographs of her children, sometimes posing nude. The Columbus police directed the woman to the campus police, who looked at the display and found no grounds for further action. Dissatisfied, the woman then threatened “to go to the media.” I removed the photographs since it was exam week and there was no need to keep them up any longer. My main reason for removing them, however, was due to my worry that I might have to spend my spring break defending, with sound bites in the media, photographs of nude children.

Passport Control.

At the convention, after my session on controversial art, which included two case studies about high school students critically studying photographs made by Robert Mapplethorpe, I was accused by an emotionally distraught gentleman of misrepresenting Mapplethorpe’s work with my selection of Mapplethorpe images. I argued that they were an accurate sampling of the significant themes of Mapplethorpe’s larger body of work, but he accused me of “absolutely sensationalizing” the work. Our only point of agreement was that we had very different understandings of what Mapplethorpe’s work entails. I think underlying his distress, however, was my presenting aspects of gay culture, a culture to which he assumed I did not belong.

A Demilitarized Zone.

The Arts Council of Fairfax County, Virginia, has an answer to difficult questions about which artworks to show: “Nudes, weaponry, drug paraphernalia, and works which reflect violence, religious scenes, political expression or unpatriotic subjects are not acceptable subject matters” (Editors, 1994, *New York Times Magazine*, p. 16). Their policy, however, resulted in the removal of two artworks from a show at

¹This is the title of a book by Richard Bolton (1992) in which he documents and chronicles recent controversies in the arts.

the County Government Center—one, a photograph of a church in New Mexico, and the other a picture of a photographer's grandfather wearing a prayer shawl.

Bodies as Weapons.

According to a recent news service report (Gay, 1994), the secular government of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is launching an across-the-board offensive against Islamic fundamentalism. The government has begun subsidizing magazines that print pictures of nude women, images forbidden under Islamic law, and stories written by banned authors Salman Rushdie and Nobel Prize-winner Naguib Mahfouz, both of whom have been targeted for death by Islamic fundamentalists for their writing.

Border Skirmishes.

Critic Peter Plagens (1994), in a recent review of a large exhibition of Willem de Kooning's paintings, wrote that the paintings show de Kooning to be "the most passionately subtle, the most improvisationally rigorous painter the United States has even produced" (p. 66). In an article in *Studies*, however, two art educators, Doug Blandy and Kristin Congdon (1993), refer to de Kooning's paintings as "pornography" as well as to images of Catwoman in *Batman* comics and Calvin Klein's *Obsession* advertisements. They argue that "common to all of these examples is a view of women as subordinate to men. The creators of these images use sexual overtones to demean females. Disrespectful sexual representations are frequently used to depict power, and men are the source of this power in the examples given" (p. 8). Blandy and Congdon might be misread to be writing against pornography on behalf of all feminists; they make no mention of many anti-censorship feminists (e.g., Vance, 1989; Williams, 1993) who decry "the policing of desire" and wish to "safeguard the circulation of fantasy and creative expression of the erotic imagination" (Hammond in Frueh, 1994, p. 107).²

Congdon and Blandy also include Ivan Albright's painting, *Into The World Came a Soul Called Ida*, deploring both the painting and "a male artist depicting a woman in such a trivial, shallow, and passive way" (p. 8). Albright's *Ida*, however, is one of the key exemplars used by another art educator, Michael Parson (1987), in his conversations with children and adults in formulating his developmental theory of aesthetic understanding. The most sophisticated interpretations of *Ida* which Parsons obtained in his interviews hold the painting to be complex and laden with a variety of meanings, none of them "trivial," "shallow," or "pornographic."

Friendly Fire.

How is a feminist to deal with highly sensitive issues raised in multiculturalism? For example, a procedure that feminists and other human-rights activists (Weil-Curiel in Bardach, 1993) call "female genital mutilation," or F.G.M., is referred to by some multiculturalists as "female circumcision." The procedure requires girls, sometimes infants, to have all or part of their external genitalia removed, including the excision of the clitoris and the labia minora. The surgeon is typically not a doctor, and the procedure is usually performed without anesthesia. The ritual dates back to the ancient Egyptians, and its purpose is to eliminate sexual sensation, thereby better assuring virginity and thereby making women more marriageable. The procedure is widespread in Africa and practiced in the Middle East and Asia with estimates of 85-114 million women, mostly Muslim, having endured some form of it. According to a *Newsweek* report (Kaplan, 1993), Alice Walker, the African American novelist, is a prominent spokesperson loudly opposing this tradition. She

²Thanks to Anne Burkhart and Sally Hagaman for these references.

has, however, been rebuked by African women, also opposed to the tradition, for being “a Western do-gooder” guilty of “cultural condescension.” They demand she be more tolerant of customs different from her own. Walker responded, “Torture is not culture” (Kaplan, 124).

A large photographic and textual wall piece, *Untitled 1994*, by Shirin Neshat raises another issue. The Iranian artist, living in New York City, quotes Minou Reeves in the artwork: “How can we explain the paradox of the woman who accepts the laws of the harem, yet is willing to march with a rifle slung across her black chader?” The artwork pictures women who have taken up arms in the Islamic Jihad or Holy War. In concluding questions quoted in the artwork, Reeves asks, “Does the emergence of today’s female Islamic terrorist or front soldier really mark a victory for women’s status in an Islamic fundamentalist society? Or is their self-sacrifice really a tragic self-betrayal and the ultimate proof of women’s downtrodden situations in a mediaeval social order?”

Negotiated Settlements.

What would settlements be to these and other culture wars? A first step would entail a cease-fire before negotiations could even begin. Warring and peaceful factions would all be encouraged and permitted to speak, and more importantly, all parties would listen. While continuing to advocate multicultural art education, we would be willing to suspend some naive acceptances of generic multi-culturalism in favor of facing some serious problems that the acceptance of diversity engenders. We would stop censoring our selecting of art to teach for fear of reprisal, being well aware, however, that careful selecting is different from censoring. A censoring of voices would also cease: If only gay men can teach about the art of a gay man, it would follow that only African-American women can present the art of Lorna Simpson, and only straight white men that of William Wegman. This is too limiting for us and our students. Artists would continue to freely make art, some of it difficult, and art educators would discuss it fairly before labeling it derogatorily or banning it. All death threats would be immediately withdrawn from authors who have offended by their art. Then, through dialogue with offended parties, we would seek to understand the impact of the fiction that would require some to call for the execution of its authors. We would begin to work for less drastic forms of criticism than sentences of death by assassination. We would seek to understand ritual practices embedded in cultures different from our own, and work toward ways to respectfully and persuasively alter practices which mutilate girls and subjugate women.

We would advertise broadly to our public constituencies that artistic expressions are often at the forefront of social conflicts; thus, they have a very special import in society. Eventually their study would become centrally located in the general curriculum.

Terry Barrett
Senior Editor

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