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Revenge of a
Snow Queen

Blanche Boyd
Essex Hemphill
Ana Maria Simo

Lesbians at War
with the Military

Christianity and
the Homo-Sacred

Enrique Marie Presley
My Life as a
Celebutante



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Illustration by Rebecca Carrick-González

Infernal Twins: Censorship as Social Death and What To Do About It

Ana Maria Simo

Arts funding and arts censorship have always gone hand in hand, like a set of inseparable, infernal twins, identical in the core, cosmetically different on the surface. One is clean-cut, benign, innocent, presentable; the other, the unspoken one, stinks of exclusion, corruption, deals.

The system in place until last year's NEA "censorship" blowout—the now-sanctified peer-panel system—was so well oiled in its hypocrisy, so systemic and structural in its exclusion, corruption, and dealmaking, that more often than not it operated on automatic pilot, without ever engaging the morality of its players. That is the beauty of ethnocentrism: you can never, ever be wrong.

On Being a Token

I have sat on a few of those panels that select and reward, as the token Latino woman. The panels were always dominated by white men who thought they could never be wrong, or white women or white gay men blinded by their own ethnocentrism. While only bona fide heterosexual Caucasian males can aspire to be full-fledged white men, the "faux white man" slot is open to all other willing and able Caucasians, and even to some of us in the darker shades.

This is how a major panel I sat on worked: the first half-hour was for bonding—white

and faux-white men swapped academic and art colony gossip, asked about their spouses' health, made lunch appointments, and lovingly dug out shared college memories. Then they started discussing the grants among themselves.

At lunch break, they went out together. I was not invited. Not once during the two days we spent together did any of these people talk to me—not even when I butted in on their grant discussions, as I often did. When I spoke, they would sit stolidly, stony-silent, carefully avoiding eye contact with me or, in some cases, looking through me until I was finished; then they would suddenly become animated again and pick up their discussion where they had left off. The other outsider on the panel, an older African-American professor, chose to remain silent—no doubt a survival strategy learned in white-controlled academia.

When the moment came to adjudicate the couple of unofficial Latino slots, however, all heads turned toward me. And one of the faux, a female, even smiled and actually talked to me: they wanted to know who was the most deserving little brown person. They wanted advice. Like a child, I was expected not to talk unless talked to. And I was not talked to until it was time to render them a service.

Even then, I was not supposed to have the final word on what Latino writer should get a

grant. I had to fight tooth and nail to prevent a grant from going to an abysmally bad Latino writer. I realized that these people were unable to tell us apart, to tell the gifted from the mediocre—to them, we were all alike. The “minority” slots, those informal quotas, had been shoved down their throats by well-meaning arts administrators. As far as they were concerned, those were lost slots. Not only were they incompetent to discern: they couldn’t care less who filled them.

I did not behave as I was expected to. I talked back. Did I change anything? Absolutely not. I simply exhausted myself. Other than making sure that a couple of good non-white writers got the quota grants and blocking a shameful attempt by someone on the panel to give an undeserved grant to a famous crony, my efforts neither opened their consciousness nor changed the system. From his silent corner, the professor must have been chuckling at me.

Unfundable Art

While “minority art” has been an imposed nuisance for the “peers” who have traditionally controlled those panels, lesbian and gay art has until recently either been considered non-existent or seen as a notion to be ridiculed, an amateurish, community thing—in other words, judged as bad, therefore unfundable, art. Because the “peers” love to think of themselves as progressive and blasé, the quality argument was, in the pre-NEA scandal days, the alibi of choice for their political censorship and plain moral cowardice. Their social role was to carefully control transgression—how much and what kind was allowed, when, where, and how—and to make sure that such transgression remained “artistic,” that is, cut off from dangerous social resonance.

As any artist who has been around the granting game knows full well, a radical queer worldview is funding poison. What is noteworthy about last year’s NEA debacle is not that some queer artists got axed, but that they were awarded grants in the first place. They slipped through, I think, not just

because some of their work was strong enough to demolish the “quality” alibi, but because the arts establishment desperately needed fresh blood to replenish its tired experimentalist wing.

Performance art, which has long had high female and queer representation, was a primary site of experimentation in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the time had come to reward that form. The experimentalist establishment thought they were maintaining aesthetic continuity and preserving power. In other words: they were rewarding their own people, their

In a vibrant, emerging culture we still have a chance to create new

very own Young Turks. Drunk with their power to decontextualize art, they were blind to the political implications of some of the art they ended up funding, and to the virulent right-wing backlash it would provoke. Understandably, much of the art establishment’s ire at the right-wingers had to do with the latter’s primitive attempts to recontextualize artistic transgression.

Personally, I hate the freedom to be inconsequential or partially invisible. The status quo ante, the gentlemen’s-agreement-backroom-type censorship, which the arts establishment is now scrambling to restore, is the opiate of queers and non-whites.

A Violent, Poisonous Death

What is censorship? What does it mean? Why should society at large, and our communities in particular, care about it?

The dominant culture is dying a violent, poisonous death. Symptoms of this death are the rise of the cult of military power, the nostalgia for a purer and simpler America that never existed, the destruction of the welfare safety net, the attacks on civil rights, the fear of homosexuals, mounting ideological vigilantism, and increasingly open censorship.

That culture—a dying culture of waste, conformity, and ignorance, rabidly ethnocentric and racist—extends its tentacles from prime-time television to non-profit regional

theaters, from *New York Times* art criticism to *Village Voice* cultural hype, to many a “minority” cultural institution that has foolishly chosen to jump through its rotting hoops. It is a culture molded by the media and by the academic system. And, ironically, it is a culture that is often replicated in our own queer communities.

The dominant culture fears us queers for the same reason that it fears schools that allow children to think in Spanish or non-whites who refuse mindless assimilation. We are threatening because our very existence

such as ours, artist-community dynamics.

negates its monocultural, ethnocentric tenets. That mainstream culture, and the economic and political power to which it is connected, is predicated on insularity, exclusivity, censorship, and suppression of anything that cannot melt in its infamous melting pot.

I hate the elitist idea that artists deserve some special status, that if someone steps on our artistic toes it is a sacrilege. We are no better than anyone else. The only reason why people should pay attention when an artist is censored is because it is indicative of the health of society-at-large, and serves as a warning sign of things to come. Like police violence, arts censorship brutally pulls society into focus.

The recent censorship of queer artists is an attempt to ban the self-representation of homosexuals. Cultural genocide is the goal. No community has ever survived without a strong sense of its collective self. And no people can forge such a sense of self, such a collective identity, unless they can represent themselves on their own terms, as they see fit. The arts are one arena—among others—to forge that identity.

Cultural genocide: a clinically accurate term that should be rescued from rhetorical excess. With different degrees of crudeness it is performed on non-whites, on working class people, and on queers. The queer brand seems to be the crudest. Why this need to

make explicit what has long been a de facto ban on queer representation? After all, the old system of suppression through ridicule and elitism was working pretty well. The recent emergence of queer visibility, particularly in the arts, seems to have been the precipitating factor.

Because of its genocidal intent, the censorship of queer artists should be understood as an attack against each and every lesbian, gay, and queer person in this country—and, by extension, an attack on all non-white and non-mainstream communities, since the same structures of oppression are at work. Yet this has not happened, perhaps because the artist-community relationship is only slightly less adversarial among queers than in society-at-large. However, there is a new queer political activism that values and uses the media and other cultural artifacts. Queer artists are increasingly politicized. The potential for a unique confluence now exists.

Most people in our queer communities probably do not read much of what is considered literature, have never been to art school, seldom, if ever, go to the theater, and do not know what an experimental film is. The dominant culture’s high and even nouveau “low” art does not bother with people like this. They are left out of the arts debates, and they are never talked to. Most of the arts establishment considers these people to be strictly mass entertainment fodder. We, queer artists, cannot afford to do the same.

While ultimately some of us may decide to continue making art in a coded, self-referential language, one that can be deciphered only by other artists and small specialized audiences, we should all critically re-examine the need for such a strategy. The mainstream culture takes for granted that this is what non-commercial art is at the end of the twentieth century. However, as queer artists, we are dealing with an entirely new culture, and we should question each and every one of our assumptions at every step of the process. Every single scrap we inherit from this dying culture should be examined, turned around, scrutinized—particularly critical theory.

What To Do?

The first thing we need to do is to make people aware that artists are their alarm system, their trip wire. When the dominant culture steps on us, they are not simply depriving an artist of rent money, but suppressing an entire community's self-expression. That means that we must break the insularity that the dominant culture has created between artists and the rest of society, and we must begin that process within our own communities. In a vibrant, emerging culture such as ours, we still have a chance to create new artist-community dynamics.

I find the *artiste maudit* pose within the queer communities absolutely ridiculous—a bad imitation of mainstream art tantrums. The exciting thing about being a queer artist in America at the end of the century is that, for us, the union of artistic vision with community support seems within reach. Because we are obsessed with words and images and incessantly ruminate about them, because we have a leisure that most people do not have, we may be able to see things sooner, make connections, have visions—visions that, if given back to the community, the community may eventually recognize as its own. Art does not always offer instant gratification.

Taking On The Mainstream

The second thing we should do is to take on the cultural mainstream. Access to television should be our community's main priority. Television is where social and political battles are won or lost. We should relentlessly pressure PBS both locally and nationally. We should also start pressuring the networks, including the ethnic networks.

Queer artists should come out of the closet en masse in our next grant application, whether the subject matter is queer or not. We should demand funding for queer art as such, in order to gain societal recognition for the notions "lesbian artist," "gay artist," "queer artist." Remember that twenty-five years ago there was no "minority artist" category. If openly queer grants are consistently turned down, then NEA-type scandals, fol-

lowed by lawsuits and direct action could follow. Funding obtained under false pretense—for example, by never saying the word "lesbian"—will inevitably obfuscate the work made.

However, much more important than pressuring the media and funding sources is developing within our own communities both the economic resources and the mechanisms that will allow us to give our own money to our own artists, and to invest it in profitable and liberating ventures.

Fund-raising for AIDS and direct activism has been very successful. We must now start funding lesbian and gay art ourselves. We must endow queer scholarships and give financial aid to queer student groups. We are in the midst of an economic recession. The AIDS crisis has not abated. And yet, we must look toward the future.

America hates pushovers. Let's stop pretending that we are nice, innocent people eager simply to exercise our First Amendment rights. We are not nice. We are not just like any other straight artist except for sexuality and sometimes subject matter. We are historically threatening. However, as gay people and as artists, we have something the mainstream lacks and covets—energy and creativity. We have something to say; they have nothing. We have life; they are dying. Let's stop being so damned self-protective. Let's stop asking for crumbs. Let's take on the mainstream—not to be assimilated, but to unleash upon it a torrent of new thinking, art, political action, and social innovation.

In the end, the mainstream's greed will be greater than its hatred. They need us queers and non-whites to survive. The white dominant culture is quickly sinking this country into moral and physical bankruptcy. They know the country is deteriorating and their solution is a big leap backwards, to Eisenhower-era pieties. This culture needs us to bring it back to life.

This article was adapted from a presentation given at OutWrite '91, the second National Lesbian and Gay Writers Conference.

ENRIQUE

MARIE

PRESLEY

Unmasked!

behind the celebutante mystique

AN OUT/LOOK EXCLUSIVE

Mr. Presley's photographs courtesy of Blake Sorrell

