

6/99
INDEX
ON CENSORSHIP
for free expression

john le carré

harold evans

philip jones griffiths

edward lucie-smith

alberto manguel

adam phillips

underexposed



Forbidden culture

Edward Lucie-Smith

On 20 October 1999, *The Times* of London published an editorial defending the entries to the Tate Gallery's annual Turner Prize, which celebrates the activities of so-called 'cutting edge' artists – in other words, the extreme avant-garde. For the anonymous leader writer, the merit of the Prize seemed to be the amount of controversy it aroused: the Turner Prize show has always played to the gallery. For many, its main point is precisely the ruckus that it annually creates. If people are arguing about art, does not that mean, in a way, that even those who loathe them find enjoyment in these pieces?

Perhaps without entirely intending to do so, these sentences sum up the symbiotic relationship that now exists between avant-gardism in the visual arts and the impulse to censor. If no-one wants to ban a contemporary art work, then it cannot be really avant-garde.

There is, however, another element as well – the fact that avant-garde manifestations are now very often, like the Turner Prize itself, supported by the most official kind of patronage. Opposition to this kind of art currently tends to be populist. It is sometimes deliberately whipped up by the popular press. Agitation of this sort may, and sometimes does, result in acts of vandalism – damage to or complete destruction of artworks by enraged individuals or small groups. Destructive acts of this kind cannot accurately be described as 'censorship', which involves the use or misuse of official power.

The images in this section are, among other things, designed to show how this situation has come about, in addition to demonstrating the typical circumstances when censorship is most likely to occur.

The story begins with Epstein's memorial to Oscar Wilde in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris. Commissioned in 1908 from an already controversial young sculptor, this was installed in Paris in 1912, and was promptly shrouded in a tarpaulin by the administrators of the cemetery, who objected to the size and prominence of the figure's genitals. When the tomb was at long last officially unveiled in August 1914, it wore a small bronze *cache-sexe* in the shape of a butterfly. This object disappeared within a few weeks – the magician Aleister Crowley appeared in the Café Royal in London wearing it as a codpiece. The sculpture then remained undisturbed until it was vandalised in 1961, when the angel's testicles were hacked off. The culprits are said to have been 'two English ladies', offended by the fact that Wilde's tomb was an object of pilgrimage for homosexuals.

The next two episodes also involved celebrated modernist pioneers, and

were concerned with sexuality. One centres on Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. This is the best known of all his 'readymades'. A male urinal, laid flat and signed with the pseudonym 'R. Mutt', was submitted to the supposedly non-juried Independents exhibition held in New York in 1917, with Duchamp as one of the organisers. It caused a predictable uproar. One of its chief opponents was the US realist painter George Bellows, who denounced it as indecent. In the end – as Duchamp had no doubt intended – its removal was voted by a small margin.

Another victim of censorship, the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi, was less content with the situation that confronted him. His polished metal sculpture *Princesse X* was removed from the Salon des Indépendants in 1920 because of its supposed resemblance to a phallus. Picasso is said to have been the first to make the comparison. Ironically enough, the very same sculpture had been shown without trouble in the New York Independents of 1917.

The true age of censorship in 20th-century art coincides with the rise of Soviet communism in Russia and of the Nazi Party in Germany. Though the majority of the pre-Revolutionary avant-garde in Russia became ardent supporters of the Bolsheviks, their enthusiasm was not reciprocated by Lenin and those who surrounded him. Lenin told Clara Zetkin, one of the founders of the German Communist Party, that he disapproved of 'iconoclasts in painting'. The late 1920s saw a violent controversy about 'formalism', a term associated with the Constructivists which soon became a catch-all word of abuse for any artistic style that attracted the disapproval of the authorities. The foundation of the Union of Soviet Artists in 1932 created a mechanism of control which lasted, in one form or another, till the time of Gorbachev. Moments of relaxation were followed by storms, such as Nikita Khrushchev's outburst in 1954 when confronted with some mildly avant-garde work in a large exhibition held at the Manège in Moscow.

In Germany, Hitler, himself a failed painter, detested modern art. Taking up the idea of *Entartung* [Degeneration] proposed by Max Nordau in the 1890s – a concept in step with the mechanical approach to biological science prevalent at that period but already out of date by the 1930s – he denounced the modernists for their internationalism, their slavery to fashion and their supposed connection with Jewish culture. The great exhibition of Degenerate Art held in Munich in 1937 was designed to propagate this doctrine. The exhibition attracted more than two million visitors – until very recent times by far the largest number to have attended any exhibition of contemporary art.

It was Nazi persecution that conferred official status on the Modern Movement in art, as this was now perceived as representative of democratic, anti-totalitarian values. Episodes of censorship, since 1945, have usually been linked, first to sexual representation (the most effective but also sometimes the most dangerous weapon in the modernist armoury of shock) and second to social

tensions within a particular society.

In Britain, for example, there were two celebrated cases in 1966 – the prosecution of the Robert Fraser Gallery for a show of erotic drawings by the US pop artist Jim Dine, and that of Gustav Metzger, organiser of the Destruction in Art Symposium, for staging an *Aktion* by the Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch in which images of male genitalia were projected on to the carcass of a lamb. These seem to reflect the phobias of a nation then in the throes of radical social transformation.

In the United States, there was a string of art-connected censorship cases in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The series began with the closure of the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington in 1989. The same show was the subject of an unsuccessful prosecution in Cincinnati the following year. In the same year, the University of the District of Columbia was threatened with loss of official funding if it provided a permanent home for Judy Chicago's feminist installation *The Dinner Party*, and the donation of the work had to be withdrawn. In 1990, another feminist artist, Karen Finley, was denied an NEA grant in reaction to her otherwise solo performance *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, which had attracted the attention of conservative newspaper columnists. She initiated a lawsuit against the NEA, settled in her favour in 1993. In that year she also received a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Once again, sexual representations and references were an issue in all these cases, which seem to reflect the current struggle in the USA between the neo-puritan revival and constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression. This struggle, however, cannot be accurately represented as one between unestablished artists and official forces. It has more the character of a civil war within the establishment itself. □

Edward Lucie-Smith is an art critic and historian. His latest book is *Women and Art*, jointly written with Judy Chicago (Weidenfeld Illustrated, October 1999)

tensions within a particular society.

In Britain, for example, there were two celebrated cases in 1966 – the prosecution of the Robert Fraser Gallery for a show of erotic drawings by the US pop artist Jim Dine, and that of Gustav Metzger, organiser of the Destruction in Art Symposium, for staging an *Aktion* by the Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch in which images of male genitalia were projected on to the carcass of a lamb. These seem to reflect the phobias of a nation then in the throes of radical social transformation.

In the United States, there was a string of art-connected censorship cases in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The series began with the closure of the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington in 1989. The same show was the subject of an unsuccessful prosecution in Cincinnati the following year. In the same year, the University of the District of Columbia was threatened with loss of official funding if it provided a permanent home for Judy Chicago's feminist installation *The Dinner Party*, and the donation of the work had to be withdrawn. In 1990, another feminist artist, Karen Finley, was denied an NEA grant in reaction to her otherwise solo performance *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, which had attracted the attention of conservative newspaper columnists. She initiated a lawsuit against the NEA, settled in her favour in 1993. In that year she also received a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Once again, sexual representations and references were an issue in all these cases, which seem to reflect the current struggle in the USA between the neo-puritan revival and constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression. This struggle, however, cannot be accurately represented as one between unestablished artists and official forces. It has more the character of a civil war within the establishment itself. □

Edward Lucie-Smith is an art critic and historian. His latest book is *Women and Art*, jointly written with Judy Chicago (Weidenfeld Illustrated, October 1999)