

The End of Art

By Diedre Boyle (1990)

Let's face it -- this is not a good time for art. Whether attacked by neo-puritanical forces of the right who are up in arms against controversial viewpoints or by cultural commissars of the left with narrow proscriptions for correct-think work, freedom of artistic expression is seriously threatened today. We are not talking about the Soviet Union or China, I might add, but the good old USA.

As one of the so-called "clubby" members of several NEA juries as well as various other government and private funders of new media works, I have had the privilege of both seeing a wide range of work and engaging in the discussion it provokes with other critics, film and video makers, funding staff, and programming colleagues. In other words, I've been stewing about this animosity towards art in and out of closed sessions for months.

Contrary to the suspicions of Jesse Helms and followers, panels at the NEA have been composed of knowledgeable jurors who represented a diversity of viewpoints and geographic regions; the meetings have been carefully run and scrupulously fair to all applicants, and the broad spectrum of work funded offers ample testimony to this fact. Yet the damage done by righteous opponents to free expression has already put into place a mechanism that can only insure political manipulation of the decisions about what art is fundable. This is already evident outside of Washington.

At a recent public meeting of the New York State Council on the Arts' Visual Arts Committee, Chairman Kitty Hart unabashedly admitted that the Council had in the past made decisions to placate a senator. More revealingly, however, Mrs. Hart instructed program directors to flag any controversial proposals for Council discussion and then confessed, when pressed to explain why the Council appeared to be conducting a veritable witch-hunt for politically, religiously, or sexually provocative work among the panels' recommendations, that it was in response to the current political climate. This cold wind of fear did not lead to zero-funding of any proposals, not this time around. But if New York State, long in the vanguard of enlightened arts funding, capitulates to the forces for censorship and de-funding of the arts, one can expect a prolonged winter of discontent.

Any discussion of art today is a political one. The oddity is that from such opposing factions comes a similar response: suspicion, fear, a desire to control. It is tempting to speculate that the right wants to suppress art so as not to offend with graven images a wrathful God angry over our guilty indulgence in sensual pleasures. While this puritanical strain in the American psyche may explain the popular appeal of this position, it is only part. Suppression of work that celebrates diversity -- whether of religious beliefs, sexual mores, political ideologies, or

personal expression -- is essential for a political agenda that asserts the fundamentalist Bible as its authority in interpreting the Constitution as well as our national moral conduct.

But not all conservatives are fundamentalists. So long as the art of the Eighties -- with its yuppie outlook that, in Todd Gitlin's words, "takes for granted not only television but suburbs, shopping malls, recreational... drugs, and the towering abstraction of money" -- was seen to uphold neo-conservative values, funding art was a good investment in tomorrow's collectibles. But once troubling aspects of postmodern art emerged -- the ironic, often trenchant critique of late capitalist consumerism with its shallow values and underlying helplessness -- art became suspect. Perhaps the ultimate neo-conservative blasphemy of Serrano's controversial work was not against God but Consumerism.

Although the clear and present danger to freedom of expression comes from the right, certain wrinkles within the left are just as worrisome for those who believe in a dictionary definition of "independent" media -- free from control by others. I must admit it's hard for me to find the left culpable because I identify with it, but that is also why I feel angry and betrayed. My quarrel is with the left that departed the public arena in the Seventies for the security of academe. Caught in careerist strategies, many embraced the theoretical critique of poststructuralism and postmodernism as their ticket to tenure, forsaking the vernacular language of public discourse for an ever more elitist and exclusionary code of the cognoscenti, a phenomenon analyzed by Russel Jacoby in *The Last Intellectuals*. Their students today come marching into the world, armed with a superficial grasp of the truth according to Derrida or Habermas or Baudrillard and zealous about searching out deviations from the theoretical line. Theory cops one friend calls them.

This new generation of the theoretically correct have entered the arts arena as film and video makers, critics, editors, arts administrators, curators, and funding panelists. None wants to eliminate funding for the arts; on the contrary, funding should be increased, but channeled to work that promotes theoretically-correct positions. Also axed are established artists who have not had the benefit of attending the elite schools and museum programs where they could acquire these "correct" views. (This is a sign -- or is it a signifier? -- of the gap between the "Now" generation of the Sixties and the "pomo" (postmodern) Eighties. Or, as one friend points out, it is the age-old Oedipal overthrow camouflaged as a political response.) Anyone with a track record, technical skills, a style of his own, and interests independent of the current vogue, is suspect as a bulwark of the established canon. That most of these "establishment" artists exist on the margins of the mainstream and must depend upon grants to support their work seems never to compromise the distinctions between "us" and "them" that renders the new authoritarians so clear cut in their thinking.

Unless one speaks fluent "pomo" jargon, adopts an overtly critical position to the media, belongs to a correct minority group and acknowledges that the purpose of art is to change the world -- well, forget it. You need not apply. Now, there is absolutely nothing wrong with such work so long as it is an authentic expression of the artist's own intent, but when this becomes a proscriptive formula for success, conformity and compromise of personal integrity become the price exacted to get the shows, grants, and critical reception needed to build a career in the arts today. In this process the very meaning of the term "independent" is inverted to represent adherence to orthodoxy.

I find this travesty of language and meaning deeply troubling. Take the word "spectralization," which appeared in a recent funding proposal. Failing to comprehend the meaning from the context or find the word in any dictionary, I consulted a fellow juror who assured me he understood what the applicant meant, but when I implored him to explain, couldn't articulate it. Pressed further, he finally admitted he thought the applicant had meant spectaclization, but had spelt the word wrong. Spectaclization isn't in my dictionary either. (Frankly, I liked imagining the meaning of spectralization -- relating both to ghostly presences and an array of images arranged in some order according to their light emanations. It seemed fitting for a video tape.) I'm not opposed to coining new words, but I am opposed to rendering language irrelevant -- a mere maze by which the initiated enter and all others are kept outside. I was less disturbed by the poor writing of the applicant than by the shabby thinking of my fellow judge, who hadn't known what the applicant meant any more that I did, but had identified the applicant as "one of the good guys" by his use (or misuse) of the correct jargon. It's not what you say, but how you say it? Meaning be damned: you don't even need to know what is meant so long as it sounds right. This is the ultimate triumph of style over content.

I realize that in chiding the left I run the risk of giving aid and comfort to the enemy. And given the obvious asymmetry that exists between the forces of repression on the right and on the left, my analysis may seem an exercise in critical self-indulgence. But it seems to me essential that we recognize and address our own inconsistencies the better to secure an inviolable defense against the horrifying attack on freedom of expression being waged today.

In a true democracy, where the government and the people are not afraid of an exchange of ideas, where artists are respected and valued members of society, especially when they prod and provoke it, today's struggle over support for the arts and debates over what is acceptable as art would be a object lesson in totalitarian censorship.

To champion the work of independent artists -- to insure their adequate funding, distribution, exhibition, and critical attention -- may seem anachronistic on the verge of a new millenium, but it is a position which, if the human spirit is to survive the bleak times predicted by such prophets as Francis Fukuyama ("The

End of History" in The National Interest) and bill mckibben ("the end of nature" in The New Yorker), is desperately needed.

To those programmers and exhibitors who bravely present work by independent artists, knowing they may risk public censure and loss of support from institutions and individuals fearful of free expression, their courage and integrity will be a beacon to everyone trying to navigate these dark times.

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