

SUGGESTIVE POSES

Artists and Critics Respond to Censorship

EDITED BY LORRAINE JOHNSON, PREFACE BY JOHN GREYSON

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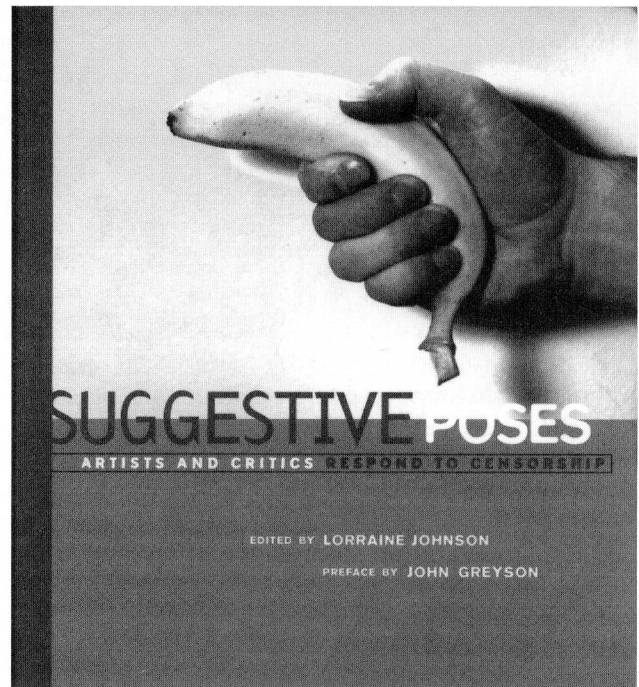
REVIEW BY ANDY FABO

We know what we're supposed to think about censorship. Anti-censorship orthodoxy is so strong in the art world that you very rarely hear anyone vocalize even a remotely pro-censorship position. However, art community reactions to cases of real censorship in the '90s have revealed this unanimity to be superficial. When incidents of censorship occur, the community is frequently divided in its support for the artists. Often the artists themselves are accused of being unreasonable, uncompromising, or of strategically creating the situation in order to increase their own media profiles. This unseemly situation is compounded by a lack of clarity about what actually constitutes censorship. Such confusions and divisions make *Suggestive Poses: Artists and Critics Respond to Censorship*, an anthology of essays and artists' projects on the subject of censorship, a valuable resource for the community.

Suggestive Poses was initiated by Lorraine Johnson and proposed to Toronto Photographers Workshop where she was co-chair of the Board. At first there was some question of the priority of the undertaking because acts of censorship at that time were confined to the hidden chambers of customs officers and the confiscation of naughty SM publications and tapes in isolated stores. However, the seizure of Eli Langer's artwork from Mercer Union nine months later (Dec. '93) and the ensuing pandemonium within the community highlighted the importance of such a book. Johnson took on the role of editor and she contributed a concise and insightful introductory essay that, along

with a congenial preface by John Greyson, written in his usual cheeky and fictive style, lays out a recent history of censorship in Canada and poses the major questions covered in the anthology. Johnson also punctuates the book with single pages of sound bytes of information and quirky anecdotes dealing with various facets of the issue. *Suggestive Poses* features four artists projects: *Aba*, a labial confrontation by Shonagh Adelman; *Mega Scenes*, a sassy commentary on the print media and recent events by Ho Tam; *Blind Bird in Flight*, a fictional conversation at a gallery opening of contentious photographs written by Hamish Buchanan; and *Seizure Story*, a conceptual work by the Kiss and Tell collective that layers personal narratives and homemade pornography stills onto a customs notice of confiscation of allegedly obscene printed matter served to them in 1991.

The essays in *Suggestive Poses* successfully cover the gambit of anti-censorship arguments and engage many of its most difficult problematics. Sociologist Mary Louise Adams provides a cursory overview of historical views of childhood, showing how radically these have



changed in the last centuries. She examines incidents that reflect the increasing sexual panic around children's sexuality.

While Richard Fung's essay is initially cloudy about issues of gatekeeping as opposed to censorship, he goes on to give a very succinct analysis of the conundrum of controlling hate literature as well as a view of anti-censorship activism from the perspective of a person of colour. Andy Paterson more thoroughly fleshes out the complexities of gatekeeping versus censorship in a witty fictional telephone dialogue between two cranky cultural bureaucrats. Su Ditta puts forward four well-researched case studies of public art institutions dealing with

ensorship questions, detailing how their various approaches succeeded with their respective communities. One of the situations arose when she curated a large national survey of video that included sexually graphic work by Queer artists. This case study provides a rare view of an institutional response from the inside. Fortunately, Su Ditta is sufficiently self-critical to bring forward a discussion of the tricky issue of warning signs. The National Gallery refused to pull the controversial works but did compromise by using warning signs to appease the complainants. In a similar incident involving Evergon's photography at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, gallery director Linda Milrod refused to install warning signs because she felt that they trigger preconceptions of the work, interfering with the public's right to judge for itself.

Tom Waugh's essay is an insightful exploration of self-censorship. In the final stages of preparation of his scholarly text on the history of gay pornography, his publisher's lawyers asked him to delete some of the more provocative images and digitally substitute the faces of more recent photographic subjects in order to avoid legal repercussions. In this piece, Waugh wrestles with his conscience, torn between his desire to bring many years of research and writing to fruition, and his wish to remain true to his principals inspired by the battles for gay liberation that he has fought since the early '70s. This dilemma was difficult to navigate and he was left feeling that some questionable compromises were made.

The two essays by contributors with legal training are markedly different. John Marriot, an artist with both a BFA and a LLB from Osgoode Hall Law School, examines the possibly legitimate limitations of free speech in a democracy, particularly pertaining to the protection of minorities. His arguments about colonial hegemony lead him to regard the historic

cultural restrictions of First Nations peoples such as the banning of potlaches, Sundances and Native languages in schools, as infringements of free speech. Unavoidable in this legal territory, he also analyzes Quebec nationalism as it pertains to notions of free speech. However Marriot's is a complex argument, not the usual knee-jerk Anglo lambasting of Bill 101.

Brenda Cossman provides an excellent essay that documents the cultural and social shifts leading to our current legal climate. A central point of her essay is that the appearances of change are deceptive. The current test for obscenity depends on feminist notions of harm and causality. While it may seem that a radical shift has taken place, she asserts that we're still stuck with the same old community standards test as arbitrated by patriarchal structures. Bringing a sophisticated grasp of cultural issues to the legal debate she recognizes that modernist "art for art's sake" arguments are no longer viable and illuminates how skeptical, contentious postmodernism (a fragmented cultural moment with many competing ideological and aesthetic positions) resists and defies notions of community standards that are inherent in obscenity laws.

Arguably, the 1993 raid of Mercer Union and the confiscation of Langer's drawings and paintings was the most shocking intrusion of the state into the cultural sphere in recent local history. The Langer case was the subject of much media attention, generating reams of journalism and editorial hand-wringing (as mainstream as *Maclean's* magazine and as far afield as the *New York Times*). In *Suggestive Poses*, the two writers dealing most extensively with Langer's work eschew mainstream journalism's appearance of detachment and supposed objectivity. Instead they provide very personal, anecdotal essays that talk as much about their

own journeys through cultural terrains as Eli Langer's. Robin Metcalfe provides a fragmented diary reflecting on his own development as a gay activist and art writer through the prism of Langer's provocative work. Elaine Carol similarly recounts her development as a feminist, Queer activist, writer and performance artist through various anti-censorship struggles. However, both of these personal journals are replete with details of recent censorship struggles and are valuable documents that provide a chronology of events and mini-portraits of the players involved.

The language of causality in censorship amplifies a notion of harm. However the Kathleen Mahoneys and Catharine McKinnons of this world are loath to examine the harm done to cultural institutions or to minority subcultures by the legal strictures that they engineered. An elegant essay by Thelma McCormick concludes this anthology, providing the insight and scope that decades of engagement with anti-censorship issues have given her. She convincingly argues that anti-pornography legislation does considerable harm to women and the causes of feminism, and she makes a devastating critique of the facile connections that anti-pornography feminists make between pornography and the subjugation of women.

Censorship and anti-censorship proponents will always be engaged in an adversarial tug of war, and unexpected encroachments by the state will pop our bubbles of cultural security from time to time as long as the various obscenity laws remain on the books. For this reason, *Suggestive Poses* should be required reading for anyone sitting on the board of a cultural organization, if not artists at large.

Andy Fabo is an artist, teacher, curator and writer living in Toronto.