

A SYMPOSIUM OVERVIEW

The Ottawa symposium on sexuality and representation was important in at least four ways. The event marked another step in the fight against censorship; it built on the growing debate on sexual representation by bringing together Canadian artists, historians and critics working in this area and it evolved important debates on analysis and strategy. I will develop each of these points in this summary and suggest some areas for future exploration.

The conference organizers and Gallery 101 in particular, took the courageous action of proceeding with the conference in defiance of the Ontario Censor Board. This action was strongly supported by those in attendance, and certainly video artists, who have been bearing the brunt of censorship, felt in turn supported by the organisers' decision. The issue of censorship and its destructive impact on both the production of images and the capacity of artist-run centres to organize festivals is no longer an Ontario-based problem. British Columbia and other provinces are introducing boards that threaten our capacity to circulate and explore not only sexual but other critical images.

Secondly, this conference did not occur in isolation. The debate throughout the proceedings built on a growing body of work. Presenters at the conference grounded their papers in Foucault's theorizations; in the work of Lacan; in British feminist film theory; in the new social history; in feminist and Marxist media analysis and

in the strategic debates within the gay, lesbian and feminist communities on these issues. As the debate is located in different social strata (feminists, artists, gay community etc.) it is not surprising that there is significant divergence in perspectives on the issues.

As well as the theoretical discussion, two major areas of political practice wielded a significant influence over the proceedings. These were the struggle by lesbians and gay men for sexual choice, and the struggle of feminism to challenge the restrictions placed on women and men by gender-based behavior. It was not surprising that many of the images that we saw that attempted to reorder perceptions of sexual experience and identity stemmed from these movements.

While not directly discussing the issue of censorship, the weight of the pro-censorship anti-porn movement cast a shadowy presence over the proceedings. With the public discourse so strongly centred on analysing mass media images, whether porn or advertising, it's not surprising that many of the papers began with an analysis of existing commercial forms of sexual imagery. This beginning led to strategies for both the production and circulation of images. The reference to mass culture, while it creates a boundary or limit for the discourse, is valuable in that it has forced us to clarify some critical issues, such as the relative control of patriarchal social structures versus capitalist economic structures in the definition of images and the designation of its viewer.

Having stated the ways that the conference provided a continuity in

the debate, I will now provide a condensed (and thus inevitably reductive) overview of central points of analysis, and then, strategy, presented in papers.

In examining mass culture, presenters looked either for continuity or rupture between mass cultural imagery, art and popular culture. Robert Mesley examined the incorporation of mass produced erotica into late 19th century French art. He suggested that some forms of art production are capable of neutralizing images that in a popular medium or mass media context were sexist. In this instance realism played a subversive role in confronting a bourgeois audience with images it perceived as inappropriate for art-making. His presentation made valuable use of social history to research the role of the laundress within the sex industry of the 19th century. By describing the social position of these women, he redefined the meaning of their image, which in twentieth century terms might be read as an impoverished working woman, but in nineteenth century terms, would be read as a prostitute. He argued that both the artist's choice of imagery and the reading of the image, is not universal but historically specific.

There was conflict between his approach and that of Marie Jeanne Musiol. She posited a 'mise en scene' controlled by men. She traced a history of the nude, describing it as the history of representations while suggesting ways that the female image had changed over time. ~~It had become depersonalized~~, there was increasing fragmentation of the image--her thesis posited ^{or} the continuity in the characteristics assigned to the female image. The

structure of patriarchy provided a determination of the artist's consciousness and the coding of imagery that overrode historical specificity.

These initial interventions centred on content analysis, that is looking at existing images and explaining their meaning. Lisa Steele's contribution to this part of the discussion was to insist on the presence of exchange relations outside of gender, as structuring the production, circulation and ultimate meaning of

images. This was a shift from previous speakers who concentrated on gender, or the control of women, by men, as the basis of exchange. In Steele's view, stereotyping in the media functions to sustain a capitalist market for sex and for images of sex.

Claude Gagnon, Geraldine Finn, Christine Conley, Joan Borsa and Bob Gallagher centred less on the content of images than on the

structures that produce meaning for sexuality and for images. Gagnon evolved three criteria which work to define meaning in pornography. These were the choice of image, the context of screening and the conception of what was seen. The latter is based on "cryptotypes" that is deeply structured codes, through which meaning is read. Essential to pornography is the presence of a moral message -- a disclaimer that allowed the experience of pleasure at the image and acted as a reinforcer of dominant values at the same time. This

gives permission to the viewer to have the pornographic experience. I thought he raised some interesting issues which emerged in the discussion after that session. The issue of moralit(ies) emerged

continually at the conference. Participants asked, "are there values

...ould be or should not be embedded in alternate sexual representation? Do we need a new morality? Who creates it, who represents it, who censors it and how?"

The analyses of Geraldine Finn, Christine Conley and Joan Borsa formed a constellation. Although these speakers drew varying conclusions, their basic methodologies were similar. All three women looked at the ways that sexuality within the existing culture is tied to the construction of gender, which in turn, was based on relations of reproduction. These speakers named reproduction as the central defining factor in women's sexuality, as it is produced by patriarchal culture. It was men's historically established control over reproductive labour that gave men overall control over women and women's sexuality.

Geraldine Finn's position provided an important point of debate for the symposium. She touched on an important concern within the anti-porn feminist community by questioning the possibility of creating alternate, or "sex-positive" images within a sexist society.

In her view, all representations of sexuality restate male control over women because sex itself is such a thoroughly male-dominated area. Though the project of feminism and sexual liberation might be to separate sex from gender, within this culture they are tied. This occurs through the meaning of certain images becoming overdetermined. No matter how the male or female is identified in the overt content of the image, the social forces that teach us to read sexual images create this "over-determination" of how we will

understand the new image. We cannot escape from a meaning or reading that reinforces women's oppression. This process is further strengthened because sexual images are produced almost exclusively for the male viewer. Men control both sex and representation, thus the representation of sex has been the representation of male control over women.

Through this logic, it is impossible to represent sex as a force for liberation. Existing power relations will simply be restated. Finn questioned not only the struggle for new images, but the struggle for a positive or new sexuality. In her view, sexuality itself was and is a male construct, we should refuse to make sex a central issue and instead deconstruct sexuality. She applied this concept to images, stating that the only images with value in relation to sexuality were those that formally deconstructed the role of the male voyeur.

There was strong opposition to this proposal from women artists working to redefine sexual imagery. They felt that as female viewers and producers, their efforts had already redefined sexual representation, and would continue to. They questioned the power that Finn invested in sexual images: why was it acceptable for women to reconstruct other forms of language, such as academic discourse, but not sexual images? Other speakers challenged the idea that there was one unified "male" viewer, and one unified female subject; they argued that there were a range of male viewers and readings and female viewers of images.

There was a noticeable difference in the analysis of participants

involved in sexual liberation movements, whose radicalization centred on their sexual identity and those whose central concern was the gender-based oppression of women in the labour force and reproduction. The speakers from the lesbian and gay liberationist perspectives presented sexuality as less fixed and more heterogeneous than did Finn, Conley or Borsa. They emphasized that both sexuality and representation are in a constant process of construction and redefinition. They saw the forces for that determination as being more accessible to pressures than did Finn.

Sue Golding suggested that there is a constant transgression of the social norm of sexuality, those who are "Other", that is excluded from the norm, recognize it as oppressive and reconstruct new meanings. There is a neverending struggle for new definitions which corresponds to a fight for power by social movements. It's not simply that artists or an abstract public produces and consumes images, but that both the creation and the understanding of images is grounded in a struggle between social forces that are present within both the producers and consumers of imagery. Subcultures take control of images from mass culture and restate their meanings. It is thus not enough to change images--the actual power relations within society must shift.

Golding emphasized that while we can recognize structures of domination, it is equally important for us to recognize and validate the understandings that are formed in daily life experience, meanings in conflict with generalized readings of experience and images. As well as as general perspective on resistances, she added an

analysis of the specificity of the female viewer. She noted that there is not "one woman", not, as she said, a "we", but rather, many women viewing images of sex and images within the culture in general. She affirmed the presence of a female spectator, not just a "male gaze", and female creators of sexual imagery. Women-made erotica or pornography has a history. She used photographs of lesbians from the past and current images to demonstrate both a history of representation by women and the difficulty in setting boundaries between what is a "transgression" of social norms and an "indiscretion", that is, within the boundaries of the norms.

Tom Waugh detailed the central role of gay porn in creating a public space for gay male sexuality. He located gay men simultaneously within a male public and at the same time external to that heterosexual male space. He identified the forces of the ghetto, the closet, the marketplace, censorship and the gay political movement as shaping the social positioning of gay men and their ability to enter into the dominant discourse by entering into public space. He traced the intensive struggle between state repression and the gay

community. The same forces that affected the position of gay men also informed the content of gay male pornography. In particular, body parts were fetishized, the symbol was substituted for the phallus in order to escape censorship. Waugh argued that the fight to defend gay erotic culture was more central in making public and strengthening gay identity than was the political fight by the gay movement. This example is of value in looking at cultural resistance in general.

It is valuable at this point to review points of analysis that need elaboration. It's clear that there's a real divergence in perspective about the impact of representing sexuality. It's important that a debate continue on this issue. This conference has helped to move the discussion beyond an analysis of pornography, into issues of practice for movements for gender and sexual freedom and for artists.

Most of the speakers emphasized the need for overall social change, but the weight of social movements versus representation as a force for change varied. I would see that as an area where we need further analysis.

As well, there are great differences over the question of what sexuality actually is! Some describe sexuality as fixed, others as fluid, some as a social structure, some as another word for gender, others as an idea. It's important in this debate for our working definitions to be clear.

A second well-worn phrase at the conference was "ideology". Again there were diverse definitions. These included the idea of the domination by ruling structures of all experience, of everything including everyday life. There was the idea presented by Bob Gallagher that a reciprocity exists between the generation of ideology by people living within social structures and formal ideologies. There was a concept proposed by Tim Guest of "non-ideological" experience", that is pure experience that is not yet articulated. In his view, the act of articulation is the location of

ideological practice.

There were differences in analysis of what constitutes art and of the ability or inability of art to escape the readings given to mass culture. Determining if there is a separate mode of production for art, exploring the relationship between art imagery and other forms of imagery, examining the links between creativity and sexual expression are further areas for debate. It was clear that a knowledge of speakers' grounding principles is important if the discourse is to reach clear conclusions.

A tangential but important question that was not explored in depth at the conference was the repression of sexuality within authoritarian societies. John Bentley Mays did address this point in his description of the lack of overt sexual imagery within the Soviet Union. Perhaps more relevant was Lisa Steele's rejoinder that North American capitalism is highly authoritarian and prescriptive about sexuality. The actual structure of sexuality was in conflict with the illusion of "choice" created by the ideology of market place democracy. Absent from the conference were speakers from the neo-

Freudian perspective who would articulate a belief in the inherent or biological nature of sexuality and examine the role of repression in channelling creativity and in forming certain fixations or images.

There were three distinct strategies argued at the conference. The first could be described as "deconstructionist": a sense that the struggle to assert new imagery and to liberate sexual expression was not viable. The second strategy centred on validating perceptions of

existing images by those who were either the subjects of imagery or excluded from imagery or viewers. A third, related strategy was the production of sexual representations by artists and writers.

Within the deconstructionist view, Geraldine Finn was the most critical of sexual imagery. She felt that all "sex-positive" images reinforced the dominant organization of sexuality. If images were to be created their function should be to disrupt the "illusion of objectivity, closure and realism". The issue was not one of content but of placing the male voyeur within the image--his voyeurism, his pleasure and control in looking, must be broken. An image that was critical, that referred to its own production, could play a limited role in deconstructing sexual images within the culture.

Claude Gagnon stated that pornography is validated by the assumptions and structure of realism, and thus the integration of the dominant morality. He saw the role of artists' representations being the creation of "new meanings". The concept of "new meaning" needs exploration. How is this idea different from morality? Artists, Gagnon argued, should work in non-realist forms in order to disrupt the meanings that are creating within representations of sexuality.

Joan Borsa raised a point of concern with the ways that women learn self-oppression. Yet we can, as empowered subjects, learn to redirect the story of our own lives. Borsa said, "we are responsible for completing the fiction, yet we do serve both as consumer and accomplice." She expressed concern with supposedly critical images that through recreating relationships of dominance would restate

power imbalances. The role of new imagery was to challenge existing relations of power. Both Borsa and Conley placed the emphasis on social movements to create a demand for new readings of culture and identity. Borsa argued for "fictitious notions of identity" to be constructed by women artists, to "represent themselves, their ideologies, their desires, in common, everyday experience, for it is here that meaning is lived and real".

The last group of speakers are those who described art production, sexual imagery, pornography, and particularly gay and lesbian images as validating forms of sexual experience. Lisa Steele stated that the important task of disrupting existing codes could take place within the places where these images are produced, for example, at the level of the mass media.

A number of speakers concentrated on issues of media and form. Tim Guest, Rene Payan, Geraldine Finn and Doug Sigurton all added perspectives on what forms were most conducive to exploring (or disrupting) sexual imagery. Concerns included: the "hotness" or "coldness" of certain media; a sense that the dimensionality of a work was important in leaving room for the spectator to play in "closing" the meaning of the image; the extent to which the construction of the image could be made clear to the viewer; the immediacy of some media against the tighter coding of others. Guest proposed that painting and drawing are media where subjectivity and emotion were more easily represented than in "hard" media like film or video.