

The Arts Should Be Censored

Censorship, 2010

"The public has an interest in preventing the pollution of its artistic culture—and the law should reflect that interest."

In the following viewpoint, columnist Ben Shapiro argues that laws must be enacted to set limits on free artistic expression. He cites several examples of artists whose unbound "free expression" has crossed the boundaries of acceptable public expression. Unless regulations are enacted, he insists, artists will continue to create art that is obscene, vulgar, and demeaning to human beings. Moreover, he fears that this "art" will become the norm, to the detriment of the culture at large.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. How does Ben Shapiro describe Aliza Shvarts's so-called art project?
2. What rights besides artistic freedom have limits, according to Shapiro?
3. Who were some of the past artists that flourished despite the imposition of restrictions on free expression, as noted by the author?

Art, they say, is in the eye of the beholder. No one has come up with a workable definition of art that can universally separate garbage like Karen Finley's body goo¹ from Michelangelo's *David*. And because art is so difficult, so amorphous and difficult to define, civilized people have shied away from attempting to place limits on it. The best policy, we have decided, is to allow everything into the artistic marketplace, and let history and time sort it all out.

There's only one problem with this strategy: If you pollute the artistic marketplace with unmitigated crap, no one will want to visit the marketplace. Art itself will die, or at least be relegated to the few, proud elitists who busily wade through mountains of manure, proclaiming it intellectual gold.

The Need for Limits

Art thrives most when it has reasonable limits. When there are no hard limits, artists who push the envelope are given the most attention. Those "artists" attract the most imitators. And so the "artist" who drops a crucifix in a jar of urine [a reference to a work by photographer Andres Serrano] breeds the "artist" who douses herself in chocolate syrup [Finley]. The "artist" who douses herself in chocolate syrup breeds the "artist" who engages in acts of sodomy before a live audience [a reference to the play *The Romans in Britain*, which contains a scene in which a man rapes another man].

And all of these artists breed the "artist" who supposedly artificially inseminates herself, induces her own miscarriages, films those miscarriages, saves the blood, mixes it with Vaseline, spreads the mixture on saran wrap and then projects the video of her miscarriages onto the saran wrap screen.

Last week [April 2008], a national furor arose over Yale student Aliza Shvarts's "art" project, which contemplated doing just that: projecting abortion videos onto abortion leftovers. The political right was understandably outraged—the immorality of the abortions is sick-making on its own. The political left was,

somewhat puzzlingly, also perturbed—they condemned Shvarts's "approach and presentation," though one struggles to see their problem, considering Shvarts's repeated abortions are legal only due to their adamant support for abortion-on-demand.

The Art World's Response

The art world was largely silent on Shvarts's project. They were not silent, however, on the prospect of censorship. "Public media has been practicing vigilant self-censorship ever since (Sept. 11, 2001)—in my opinion, a very irresponsible choice," said performance artist, Yale lecturer and probable Shvarts-advisor Pia Lindman. "I am still waiting for this self-aggrandizing mass psychosis; the uncritical belief in the omnipotence and goodness of the American people, troops and government, to dissolve and have it replaced with sober self-reflection."

Cary Nelson of the American Association of University Professors was more circumspect: "Academic freedom for faculty and intellectual freedom for students give them the right to speech that shocks and challenges." Helaine S. Klasky, spokeswoman for Yale, stated, "The entire project is an art piece, a creative fiction designed to draw attention to the ambiguity surrounding form and function of a woman's body. (Shvarts) is an artist and has the right to express herself through performance art."

All rights have reasonable limits. The right to bear arms does not include a right to own a nuclear weapon. The right to free exercise of religion does not include a right to ritualistic child sacrifice. The right to free expression in art should not include a right to film yourself having an abortion; neither should it include a right to use feces, urine or any other bodily fluid in public, nor should it include a right to engage in sex acts before live audiences.

The public has an interest in preventing the pollution of its artistic culture—and the law should reflect that interest. As for the "boundary-pushing" performance "artists," those "artists" who cannot work within the bounds of common decency should find another line of work. [William] Shakespeare somehow worked within the strict guidelines of his time; so did da Vinci, and so did Beethoven, Brahms, Bach and Mozart. If Aliza Shvarts, Robert Mapplethorpe [a controversial photographer whose work is sometimes sexually explicit], Andres Serrano and other "artists" cannot do the same, they ought to consider going into the demolition business. After all, they're so good at destroying worthwhile ideas and limits already.

Footnotes

1. Karen Finley is a controversial performance artist whose shows have included smearing her body with chocolate and other substances.

Further Readings

Books

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