

# **CENSORSHIP IN CAMOUFLAGE:**

A PROJECT ABOUT THE UNEXPLORED ASPECTS OF  
CENSORSHIP

**N**ational  
**C**oalition  
**A**gainst  
**C**ensorship

**Discussion Series I, Summer 2002**

**Free Markets and Free Expression?  
Self-Censorship: The Censor Within**

Coordinated by Robert Atkins, Svetlana Mintcheva (National Coalition Against Censorship) and Antoni Muntadas in partnership with the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at New School University.



## CENSORSHIP IN CAMOUFLAGE: A PROJECT ABOUT THE UNEXPLORED ASPECTS OF CENSORSHIP

The *Censorship in Camouflage Project* consist of a series of discussions and publications exploring structural, economic, political and cultural factors—in addition to the more frequently debated legal issues—constraining artistic expression. The project is conceived as a laboratory of ideas, where problems are investigated in depth and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Our focus is on presenting the issues in all their complexity, rather than providing simple (and simplistic) “answers.”

The Project is closely connected with *The File Room* ([www.thefileroom.org](http://www.thefileroom.org)), an interactive Internet archive documenting 500 years of censorship. *The File Room* was initiated by Antoni Muntadas in 1994 and originally produced by the Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago. The archive is presently maintained by the National Coalition Against Censorship. The wider definition of censorship adopted in *The File Room* allows it to record instances of censorship through market mechanisms, the censorship of private galleries or that of educational institutions, as well as suppression of work by limiting its distribution or refusing it publicity. The *Censorship in Camouflage Project* shares this understanding of the nature of censorship and aims to explore the multiple and subtle ways in which freedom of speech is suppressed.

The *Censorship in Camouflage Project* operates from the assumption that censorship is a far larger phenomenon than its legal definition suggests. Legally, censorship is the governmental denial of freedom of speech. Speech is suppressed, however, through far more varied and indirect means. Artists’ voices can be silenced through economic



means even more effectively than through old-style political or ideological suppression. Ultimately, economic pressures join political and ideological demands to produce the subtlest censor of all: the internalized voice of self-censorship. The value attributed to free speech frequently clashes—or is perceived to clash—with other societal values including the desire to protect children from “inappropriate” materials, the imperatives of “community standards” or political correctness, and intellectual property. The *Censorship in Camouflage Project* operates from a multi-disciplinary perspective that aims at redefining censorship as the result of systemic repression rather than a legal

issue limited to the governmental suppression of particular works.

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## **CENSORSHIP IN CAMOUFLAGE PANEL I: FREE MARKETS AND FREE EXPRESSION?**

**June 4, 2002**

**Robert Atkins:** Welcome to our panel tonight, *Free Markets and Free Expression?*. Once again I'm indebted to Sondra Farganis, dean of the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, who makes so many programs like this one possible. Tonight's panel is the first of two under the umbrella title of *Censorship in Camouflage*, the other will take place next week—same time, same place—and is titled *The Censor Within*. I've been working with Antonio Muntadas, the artist who produced *The File Room*—an online archive of censorship and a conceptual artwork, and Svetlana Mintcheva, who is the Arts Advocacy Coordinator at the National Coalition Against Censorship. Before going any further, I want to introduce them both.

**Antoni Muntadas:** For me, the origins of these panels started in 1989 when I was commissioned to create a work for Spanish Television. At that time there was only one Spanish TV channel. I was asked to do a work about TV itself. Living in the USA, I found it an interesting opportunity to deal with my own memories about my native country and the history of Spanish television. After two years of work, the piece was finished and I was paid, but it was never broadcast. I didn't regard this work as a work for a gallery or for an institutional context, since it was made for broadcast. I spent almost three frustrating years thinking what I should do, especially since I was living here where polemics from across the Atlantic would not make so much sense.

While spending time in Chicago, I began to work with the Randolph Street Gallery—an alternative gallery that has disappeared—to create a work about art censorship that became *The File Room*. And the first case I posted on it was my own TV case. In a way, my frustration was caused by thinking about the way we define censorship. The ways censors operate nowadays are much more complex than burning books, destroying films or erasing texts. Besides the religious and political realms there are economic values and commercial situations involved. *The File Room* was completed in 1994 and it is still online. It has changed servers and is being maintained by the National Coalition Against Censorship. Robert Atkins, Svetlana Mintcheva and I realized that there was a need to define the various ways censors work now. We decided that the issues of economical and self-censorship are complex enough to create these panels.

**Svetlana Mintcheva:** When we were planning these panels we did not realize it was going to be the so-called *Arts and Outrage* month in New York. I just came from the opening of the *Arts of Outrage* exhibition at the Robert Miller Gallery in Chelsea, which made censorship seem extremely glamorous. There are a variety of pieces in the show. None of them is exactly about money, but the whole event was about money. It was a glamorous Chelsea opening and the work we do at the National Coalition Against Censorship is, unfortunately, not as glamorous.

When people talk about censorship and public funding one thing they believe is that when you are censored you get more publicity. There is a belief that maybe public funding, which necessarily has strings attached to it, should be just abolished and art left to the free market. "Let the best ones make money and the worst ones to be forgotten." The

market censors as well, but it is never researched and never analytically discussed. So, when we were thinking of this panel, that was clearly one kind of gap in current debates. During the nineties there was a very lively discussion about censorship of art in relation to public funding, but corporate funding and the complexities of this alternative to public funding were never analyzed. Public arts funding comes with certain First Amendment responsibilities. However, the First Amendment does not apply to private funding. Private funders can legally choose to censor this and display that. Exclusively relying on private funding could really skew what we see and what we hear.

Finally, I want to remind you that if any of you, or your friends, encounter censorship, there are number of organizations that can help. Even if they don't have the glamour of TV or the Robert Miller Gallery, these are the organizations that do the grassroots work.

**Robert Atkins:** Now we are going dive in. You've already heard that our purpose in organizing these panels is to broaden and refine our ideas about what constitutes censorship. Censors are both more brazen and more subtle than ever, but supporters of free expression haven't changed our tactics of resistance at all over the past decade. Censorship has been too narrowly and legalistically defined. It is no longer exclusively a black-and-white question of whether governments suppress particular points of view. In the United States, proponents of limiting speech now use more sophisticated—or perhaps more sophistic—arguments about the need to suppress expression.

For instance, it is often noted that the Supreme Court protects literary expression far more fully than visual

expression. But consider a new book you might have heard about called *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children From Sex* by Judith Levine. The publisher is University of Minnesota Press and practically the entire state legislature has threatened the press's funding—without reading the book of course. The Press, by the way, had the book vetted by three-times-as-many outside readers as usual, anticipating that the subject alone might raise hackles. Liberal groups are so afraid of being tainted by the charges of pedophilia that Levine has been left with shockingly little support and you can be sure that the University of Minnesota Press isn't going to publish another book on this subject. So political pressure on this exemplary university press is our first example of economic censorship tonight.

This doesn't mean that plain old-fashioned censorship no longer exists. Cobb County, Georgia, eliminated all of its arts funding in order not to fund a Terence McNally play; that is a gay-themed play by a gay writer. As with the *Sensation* show, politicians can try to suppress publicly-funded free expression, and sometimes succeed. Thankfully none of ex-Mayor Giuliani's taxpayer funded assaults on the First Amendment held up in court. But the Supreme Court has allowed the National Endowment for the Arts to not support certain kinds of "indecent" artistic expression, based on Congress' vague "decency" clause. (This was *Finley et al.*, the so-called NEA 4 case, which was, surprisingly, not resolved until 1998.)

As an historian, I am always shocked and incensed by our cultural amnesia, which primarily helps those who try to paint the status quo as inevitable. Homelessness or inefficient and inhumane medical care are the result of policy decisions. How many of you know about CETA, which

stands for the Comprehensive Training and Employment Act? It was a seventies' program that by the end of Jimmy Carter's administration was channeling more than \$250 million annually to artists and art workers, mostly as employees in community arts agencies. That's more than the budget for the NEA has ever been. And yet it's conventional wisdom that the only American model for employing artists was the WPA of the Depression.

September 11th yielded a climate of jingoism and patriotism that sometimes equated critical thinking with anti-Americanism. Precisely the opposite of the way our democratic culture ought to work. Covert censorship is at play when institutions, presenters and artists feel such a "chilling effect." I'm not just talking about vicious attacks on Susan Sontag for her outspoken words in the *New Yorker*. Consider these examples of intimidation, harassment and censorship. In December, the FBI raided the Texas Art Car Museum in Houston and interrogated the staff after an anonymous tip that there was dangerous work in the show. That work was a painting about the Gulf War 10 years ago with the Houston skyline in flames. The same month in Daytona, FL the Director and Senior Curator of the Southeast Museum of Photography resigned after the curator was told to cancel a February exhibition of photos of Afghanistan. In Austin, TX on January 3, the *Austin American-Statesman* published its annual review of the local music scene. It had a cover image of a burning amplifier, intended to evoke the World Trade Center blaze and signify a bad year for local music. Scores of readers called for editors to get axed but editor-in-chief Rich Opiel refused to fire anybody and blasted "bumper sticker patriotism." Nevertheless, he also apologized for the cover.

These are generally acts by individuals. But they are also

acts by individuals who feel empowered to make them. The system—which includes the media—allows them. But does it encourage them? Our task is not only to analyze how new forms of censorship work *but* how they can be combated. This week we'll be dealing with the question of economics. Or questions. I've already mentioned the literal and figurative costs of defending oneself in the court of public opinion, as with the University of Minnesota Press. In an era of intense expansion among museums the never-ending quest for money has broad implication for art culture in the US. Museums have embraced the corporate dictum that bigger is better. Just as with donations to politicians, people and corporations want something for the money they contribute. The interests of a small, moneyed segment of the population are well-served.

A quest for wide audiences encourages the Smithsonian to travel a *Star Wars* exhibition. How does that jibe with that museum's stated, taxpayer-supported, educational goals? Or any museum's educational mandate? There are only so many exhibition slots and if *Star Wars* fills one, an actual art exhibition doesn't. This is the same Smithsonian willing to take huge amounts of money for a so-called "Hall of American Achievers," which was fortunately kiboshed. But in 1980, Thomas Messer said of the Guggenheim's Frank Lloyd Wright building, "We'll never, never rent it out for parties." Something tells me we're going to see that Hall of Achievers sooner or later.

I'm going to say a little about corporate arts funding since, despite thirty invitations, and a couple of initial acceptances we have no corporate funders here. Some are at *Documenta* instead. I don't want to overinterpret this, but in twenty years of organizing more than fifty panels let's just say I've never had this problem recruiting panelists.

There was an interesting piece in the May 28 *New York Times* about Jean-Marie Messier, the CEO of Vivendi Universal and his involvement on big cultural boards in New York like the Whitney's, where it's expected that board members will contribute or raise at least \$100,000 a year. As David Resnicow, president of Resnicow Schroeder, which matches museums and corporate sponsors said: "What better way to integrate yourself into the political, business and cultural leadership than by getting involved in museums and other cultural institutions?" So it's clear what Messier gets and it's clear what the Whitney gets. It's unclear what the public gets. I don't think there's a case to be made that bigger budgets and institutions make for better programs.

But what is tragic is that none of the corporations that link their advertising with the shows they sponsor open their wallets for art world's crucial research-and-development labs, that is alternative spaces, or as they are now known, artist run organizations. Many are going under and their demise will alter the ecology of the art world. Commercial galleries can't be expected to support non-commercial art. MoMA's Project Room is not Artists Space. This is a problem for Washington, Albany and every foundation funder as well. There is no vision about the ecology of the art world as an interlocking system.

I could rant on, but I'll introduce our first panelist, Martha Rosler, a well-known artist who works with images and text. She lives in Brooklyn and has been teaching at Rutgers for many years. You may have seen her retrospective last year, which was split between the New Museum and ICP. It examined her very consistent engagement with social issues manifested at extremely

varied sites including the TV set, the kitchen, the transportation system and the streets.

**Martha Rosler:** When the assaults on the public funding of art were first instituted in the early 1980s, I participated in a panel at a 1982 photo conference. I wrote up a set of what I called "theses on defunding." I want to consider what is the same and what has changed since then. My theses began:

1. The presence of monetary support for art cannot be viewed as neutral.
2. The source of monetary support cannot be viewed as neutral.
3. The presence and the source of funding have a systemic influence that is both economic and ideological.

I went on to suggest some differences between government support, which has to seem, as I wrote, "disinterested and depoliticized—that is, that appears firmly aesthetic—and has supported work that satisfies criteria of newness and experiment" and corporate support, which has to answer to the demands of public relations in enhancing the "good name" of the corporate enterprise, which tends to put it in the arena of "aesthetic territory that is already known and ideologically encompassed, territory necessarily barren of present, "cutting edge" art, ideologically engaged art, or anything other than the safe."

In the intervening years, what has changed? The answers are cultural and ideological as well as financial. The ideological changes in the larger society include the immensely successful refurbishment of the image of the



businessperson—the ground trooper of capitalism— from the man in the gray flannel suit to the intrepid warrior and combatant of “actually existing socialism.” The demise of “actually existing socialism” led to the faltering of the dominant utopian model of alternative ways of organizing social life, alternatives to capitalism, that is.

Within the art system and its subculture, we need only point to the vanquishing of high culture by mass culture, which has led to the further imposition of the “success” mode of celebrity culture onto the art world.

In these years, the arguments over funding and censorship have matured to some degree. The battle itself produced something of a renewed public exploration of the questions surrounding the social meaning and public presence of art and the sources of its support, whether governmental, institutional, individual, or private. This renewed exploration has not necessarily produced good outcomes for us. The politically amplified attacks on certain forms of art and art institutions have intensified as the public has shown that it does not at all mind seeing politicians or religious interest groups attack artists—those deceitful charlatans and snake-oil salesmen! The course of the battle has inoculated enemies of any art that has aspirations beyond the clever and the decorative against the most obvious charges of censorship and helped them develop other arguments aside from their touchstone argument, which is that the works in question are not suitable for hanging above the couch or being exposed to children. (They have even learned to say, adopting language of the left, that such work offends their identities, usually as Christians.) But basically they argue that government money is taxpayers’ money and that most taxpayers despise this work. This is the sort of argument you make about

charitable giving and falls in the same category, say, as services to the poor, the destitute, and prisoners—that it is done without much gain to yourself as a citizen and certainly not from those to whom you are giving money. Ultimately, though, the new arguments for censorship cast the support of all categories of art back onto the market, which of course is pernicious in that this argument simply normalizes art production into just another commodity, which tends to cause artists to bridle.

It also cynically obscures the actual operation of the various elements in the art system that are necessarily implicated in having an artist reach even the buying public, let alone the wider audience, while at the same time relying on those self-same complexities in the hopes they will extirpate the art it claims not to censor. Casting any particular work onto the market to support it is to cast it into a very uncertain situation in which all sorts of factors may wind up causing the work to be suppressed, from its riskiness to its lack of salability.

The tactic of censors in the past decade who seek to avoid the taint of censorship, is to defund, or threaten to defund, publicly supported institutions or groups that exhibit the work. Former Mayor Giuliani threatened to defund the Brooklyn Museum in relation to Chris Ofili’s painting of the Virgin Mary in the *Sensation* exhibition and was stopped by the court. But this kind of defunding has actually happened at many institutions around the country since the early 1980s. As the Brooklyn Museum episode showed, the ideological dimensions of any particular skirmish are much more important than the facts, since few opponents bothered to look at the work, or fairly to describe it, or even to talk with the artist about his intention. In the battles of the early nineties, which centered on

photography, the apparent “facts” of the representational image could easily be used to obscure questions of intent and interpretation.

The defunders very early, thanks to the arguments of Hilton Kramer and friends, successfully destroyed government grants to critics, removing not so much a sure form of income, which these grants certainly were not providing, as the idea that critics are public intellectuals. Thus making it easier for only right-wing or centrist critics to be widely heard, since rich publishers run the gamut from center-right to far right. Less than twenty years later the defunders’ arguments [about critics] were used to bring about the end of grants to individual artists.

Between the end of the seventies and the present, we have seen the complete re-emergence of the careerist model of art making. The word “career” itself, taboo up until then, has become the be-all and end-all of artistic goals in the minds of many inside and outside the art world. The concept of “art worker,” a popular alternative in the populist seventies, has been buried.

Let me explore this a bit further. Having a successful career means starting early and within sight of the top of the enormous pyramid of competing art-makers. It means that you are not so much having an art “practice”—sounds like a term from the lexicon of professionalism, as art worker was drawn from the proletarian or craft model—as you are running a career that seeks a mass audience, or other form of mass public recognition and significant financial reward. Having a career means you have accepted or become part of the dominant discourse of capitalism, in the sense of having a strategy for future material reward. I hear from current art graduate students that in effect this

career runs them: Graduate school is for many seen as the try-out for gallery representation, which means that the mental space for experimentation is reduced. Between that and the steeply escalating cost of grad school, the notion is that grad school is a training ground for entry into already existing art institutions.

As I pointed out in my original ‘theses on defunding,’ however, the very enormity of these pressures toward institutional harmonization also produces an obdurate group of practitioners who refuse to adopt the implicit cynicism and social disengagement of the dominant mode. These artists hold to a reworking of the Romantic vision of artist as seer, interpreter of the present and prophet of the future. Most have, like Walter Benjamin, demoted or excised the metaphysical element from this in favor of the idea of social transformation while retaining a notion of authentic voice.

So what now does public art consist of? As I remarked at a conference on cultural capital a year ago, it is “probably not large abstract sculpture... it is probably nothing than can be construed as antithetical to the image of any social group. It is not critical, and on the model of the YBAs [Young British Artists], it may be downright unthinking. Most likely, it is spectacle. We have seen the enthusiastic return of three elements besides the aestheticism previously forsworn by ‘advanced art’: Mysticism, Technics, and Fun. Enthusiasm for these strategies stems from collectors, dealers, and funders. They persuade the various publics that art may be beautiful, cuddly, awesome, even ‘edgy’— but it does not threaten one’s world view or credo.”

So how do artists think about inserting themselves into the discursive space of the putative public sphere? Many young

artists' involvement with the everyday reflects an almost Foucauldian vision of the multiple links or networks of power between individuals, groups or collectives, and the state. It is oriented to the whole field of practices that structure agency and activity—from Seattle (WTO) and sweatshops to street-corner surveillance in New York City. The political rationality of neoliberalism seems to work simultaneously in an individualizing and in a totalizing manner. Who knows what kind of art will come out of that?

Just as the assault on public funding signals the death—or at least the drastic shrinking—of the public sphere, a collectively produced imaginary space in a society where the search for the Good, the True, and the Beautiful might be located, it necessarily entails the death of the private sphere, since public and private are two sides of the same coin. What this means for the pursuit of art as an endeavor apart from marketing, public relations, decoration, and stylishness is the question at hand.

**Robert Atkins:** Now I want to introduce James Baumgartner who is, in his own words, an "RTMark agent and creator of VoteAuction.com." The RTMark collective is a culture jamming group that legally operates as a mutual fund, raising funds for hybrid art/anti-corporate projects and taking the legal heat for them. RTMark matches donors and activists for a variety of activities, not to mention impersonating officials of the WTO. These activities include projects replacing buxom gals in video and cd-rom games with kissing boys, to subsidizing the work of the Zapatista flood net, which distributed software to temporarily disable the web sites of the Frankfurt Stock Exchange and Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo in support of the Zapatistas.

**James Baumgartner:** I am going to show you a video,

which is a general overview of what RTMark does. In terms of censorship, the video shows that a big part of RTMark's program is corporate sabotage, but another major component involves blacklisted cultural production. I created VoteAuction.com, a satirical website that claimed to be a marketplace for votes in the 2000 presidential election. People could sign up on the website to auction their votes and affect elections. I thought it was pretty obvious from the site and the language used that it was satirical, but some people didn't see the satire in it and decided that it had to be shut down. The first was the election commissioners of Chicago who brought a lawsuit against me and several other people involved. The site was shut down for a few days. The way they did it—which is typical of Internet censorship—is that they go after someone who stands to lose money. We didn't have much, so it was not a big deal. So they went after the company I registered the domain name through and listed them as a defendant in the suit. They revoked the name, which effectively shut down the site. That's one example of a different kind of censorship that has nothing to do with funding. Just go straight to someone who is producing the work and sue them until they cannot produce the work anymore.

RTMark's website allows people to post a project that they want to have. And they try to find workers who will work on a project. So I posted VoteAuction.com on RTMark to get some funding and I've gotten a few hundred dollars, as have lots of other projects. One that has quite a large amount of money behind it is a project to convince a company to pay a couple to have their baby tattooed at birth with the company's logo. It's one of those projects that's never going to happen.

Another project that I've been working on is Inverse Radio Remix, which is also tangentially related to censorship. I take hip-hop songs that are censored for the radio and then do an inverse radio remix. Radio remixing of a hip-hop song is where they remove objectionable words, so there are blank spaces in it, or words that have some sound effect on them. In these songs drug references are very often taken out. The word "valium" was deleted from the Eminem song I just played, where the word "pills" was replaced with "hills." I took a song and converted the remix so that all you hear are the censored words and everything else is either obscured or deleted. I created a CD mix of them and would like to print about 500 and distribute them through shop-giving. You'd legally buy something, take it home, modify and bring it back to the shelf. In this case it would be the burned CD, so I am not taking something from the store, but I did buy the original song. This will ensure problems with the companies that put up these songs, who would probably have problems with copyright infringement, since I copied a song and altered it, although this which is arguably legal under the provisions of fair use.

That's all what we're up to for the moment at RTMark.

**Robert Atkins:** I am happy to introduce our next presenter, Ruby Lerner who is CEO and President of Creative Capital, a New York-based foundation. She came to that position with a wealth of experience. Ruby has served as Executive Director of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers (AIVF); publisher of *The Independent Film and Video Monthly*; Executive Director of Image Film/Video Center in Atlanta, Executive Director of Alternate Roots, a coalition of performing artists in the Southeast, and Audience Development Director at the Manhattan Theatre Club.

**Ruby Lerner:** Regarding overt censorship matters, attention has focused primarily on the public sector. What is much more difficult to examine is the subtle role that private sector philanthropy plays in determining what kinds of art and ideas get produced and then disseminated. It is hard to call the practices I am going to describe as censorship in any of the ways we normally think of it, but the point is we don't know what important ideas and people we're not getting access to as a result.

I'm going to focus on living artists creating new work. Often when people talk about support for "the arts", it seems that they mean anything *but* support for actual living, breathing artists. As James Baldwin said, "Everybody wants an artist on the wall or on the library shelf, but nobody wants one in the house."

Years ago I read a wonderful article in the Sunday *New York Times Magazine* by composer Lester Trimble, he was lamenting the state of support for contemporary composers; he said, "Year after year we starve the horse while applying layers of gilt to the cart. But for all our grand expenditure of money on concert halls and theaters, we are not enriching our culture by one jot."

I am completely baffled by people who believe work shouldn't be supported unless the artist is long dead and the work has "stood the test of time." Think about applying this ludicrous principle to support for scientific research. Well, there wouldn't actually be any scientific research, would there? You'd just have scientists endlessly writing essays about experiments done a century ago. Think of what we wouldn't have now. So, nothing could be more important than support for our contemporary creative voices.

In fact, I'm going to posit a radical proposition that perhaps it's possible to judge the health of a community or a society by how well it supports its contemporary creative voices in all areas—education, science, business, humanities and in the arts.

So, what are some of the policies and practices of private sector philanthropy that may, either knowingly, or—since I prefer to be optimistic, unconsciously—discourage the fullest expression of diverse ideas? How much private sector philanthropy is going to support and promote the work of living, breathing artists? Or, in other words, do funding policies and practices in private philanthropy actually reward dead artists at the expense of the living?

Private philanthropy consists of support from individuals, historically the largest source of private contributions, foundations, which are second, and corporate support, which comes in third. According to the Foundation Center's most recent Arts Funding Update, in 1998 all private arts giving totaled \$7.66 billion, with the foundation sector, (56,600 strong, by the way), providing an estimated \$3.69 billion for arts, culture, media and the humanities in 2000. Just to focus on the foundation sector for a moment, \$3.69 billion dollars is a lot of money. Where is all this money going? Again, from the Foundation Center Update—38.2% went to specific project support, 32.4% went to capital support, generally that would be construction support for building expansions or to help create or augment an endowment fund, and 21.9% was provided for general operating support.

What might these numbers tell us? That the least amount of money is going toward the ongoing capacity building of organizations; this is particularly important money for the small and mid-sized organizations that support individual

artists and innovation more generally. Instead these organizations are forced to perpetually invent new programs in order to continue attracting project support, the largest category. This eats up a lot of energy.

Also, we've seen valuable initiatives created to address a specific issue in the field, sometimes for a three-five year trial period, during which many demonstrate their importance, only to be financially abandoned so that they can never come to full maturity. I've been saying that our field is littered with the corpses not of our failures but of our successes. We've lost the NEA's Advancement Program and the Regional Re-grant Program, to name just two important public sector initiatives. But I suspect that there's a village of lost ideas out there.

Back to funding. About a third of foundation funding is going toward capital expenses. I'm just speculating, but I don't think it's unfair to assume that most of this money will be going to larger and more traditional arts organizations.

The discipline breakdown is also revealing. The performing arts received 32.2% of arts grant dollars, and the report stresses that there is especially strong support for symphony and opera, 29.1% went toward museum activities, 9.9% went to media and communications which includes public television and radio, and multidisciplinary arts, especially multi-purpose arts centers, arts councils and arts education programs accounted for another 8.8%.

Now, of course, in each of those broad categories, some of the funding is going to artists creating new work, but, I think you can begin to see my point which is that relative to the total arts giving, support to living artists will be small. It would be really great to have the actual percentage of total arts giving that IS going to support the

work of living artists, and to the organizations that support the creation of new work. This would be a great graduate student project, for instance, to sort out support for museum exhibits of living vs. dead artists, and of the living, how many are not already "famous." This information would be tremendously helpful to those of us attempting to advocate with foundations specifically, and the private sector generally (which also includes individuals and corporations.)

We need a Percent for Artists program. By this I mean putting artists back into the arts and bringing artists into the house. Perhaps we could think of it as tithing for the future. What an amazing difference just 10%, just 10%, of that total \$7.66 billion (or \$766 million) would make for the work of contemporary artists creating original work as well as sustaining the organizations that help working artists.

Further, we need to evaluate how well all institutions, programs and projects support artists. If endowment funds are being raised, what percentage will go to support artists' projects? What percentage of annual operating budgets support artists' projects directly? Boards need to monitor this; funders need to monitor this. If we care about the future, it needs to be of concern.

**Question from the audience:** Why do you think individual artists are so poorly supported?

**Ruby Lerner:** I think Martha said it extremely well: The individual is a locus of uncertainty, unpredictability—which are things that are very fearful. I was meeting with a wonderful foundation person, a major arts donor and she said that on her board only one person had ever heard of the Walker Arts Center. This is an organization that is

giving a lot of money to the arts. So there's very limited accountability, there are no requirements for people who sit on the boards of these foundations regarding knowledge of the field they are engaged in. There are still big accountability issues in this arena.

**Robert Atkins:** This also brings us into the legal arena: It is the state Attorney Generals' role to monitor the accountability of boards. I was struck by what you said about operas and symphonies, Ruby, because it's always taken for granted that operas are going to lose huge amounts of money.

**Question from the audience:** Is there research on how much money goes to the production of contemporary art?

**Ruby Lerner:** I am not aware of any research, that's part of my point that it's hard to make the case without having enough information, but who is going to pay for this information? This is going to be very time consuming, if I would retire right now, this would probably be my project. It would be very revelatory and I think it's actually necessary to create a greater level of awareness. We figured out today that Creative Capital, which is a very small entity, is one of the few places that are funding individual artists today and collective creation nationally and across all disciplines. And our budget is two hundredths of one percent of those \$7 billion that are allocated. It's too pitiful. I started really thinking about the ramifications of this information. It's a scandal.

**Robert Atkins:** Another thing: Some ways artists are fetishized in our celebrity culture, while the supportive structure for the field is not even referred to.

**Ruby Lerner:** Yes, and it's killing to try to keep those smaller organizations alive. I ran a grass-root cultural organization of performing artists in the South, I ran the regional media center in Atlanta, I ran the National Media Organization and always the same: You get better and better at what you do and it only gets harder and harder. It's a brutal environment; I think NAAO—the National Association of Artists Organizations—is a good example. It was one of the only places that was willing to engage the battle of the Culture War. And it practically killed them.

**Question from the audience:** How do you enter the arena of "MBA-speak" without being co-opted.

**James Baumgartner:** You could see clearly the appropriation of "enemies' language" in the RTMark video you saw. It's meant to look like a corporate training video. In my work on VoteAuction.com I consistently use business language and business buzzwords—and there's a danger when you start using those elements you start thinking more and more like a free market capitalist. One other RTMark project, which unfortunately I am not with, is [www.gatt.org](http://www.gatt.org). Its website takes on the look and feel of the World Trade Organization. A number of times they've been contacted through the [www.gatt.org](http://www.gatt.org) website to speak at various symposia about globalization, international trade and the like. Essentially they go to these symposia and impersonate WTO staff. They've done this a number of times and they keep getting invited. The first time they did it they presented VoteAuction.com as a viable method for investing in democracy, as a good example of free market democracy. Another time they demonstrated means of maintaining control over your workforce via surveillance video. Each time they speak people completely buy it. They recently issued a press release saying that the WTO is

going to dissolve and reform under completely different rules and they outlined those rules. Instead of saying that the WTO's new goal would be to facilitate trade, they said that its goal was to make a better life for the people of the world.

**Ruby Lerner:** They moved through critique to envisioning—they gave the WTO a new mission. RTMark is one of our grantees and I've learned a lot from them. They have appropriated language from the dot-com boom and the venture capital world. And I didn't know much about venture capital; I've spent my life running arts service organizations. So now I can use that language in those situations. But my goal is to integrate public service processes into this very private sector of funding. There's a vacuum that we think we can fill. I want to see whether by both designing and articulating a more comprehensive system we could assist artists in having more impact.

So we have four components in our system now: The first is sustained support for projects, so people can come back after the initial award and ask for additional support. In fact we've reserved additional support for each artist—people don't believe this. And what we are trying to create is something very pragmatic. We also provide support to a grantee beyond a project; we are interested in people coming out of this with a greater sense of control over their careers. What's problematic about the traditional career thing is putting an individual at the service of whatever is out there. We want people to be able to control their own fate, because that system infantilizes artists. The third thing is nurturing the community of funded artists. This grew out of my experience running a performing arts collective in the South. We did an annual retreat every year, and I saw what happened over a period of time:

Incredible relationships would build, artistic collaborations happened; a whole new way of talking about a work grew over a period of time. So I knew that bringing people together would be one of the most important things that we could do.

The last component is engaging the public, and we are currently taking a year off grant making to promote the artists' projects we have already funded. There's more and more. We are trying to focus on individual, already existing projects instead of producing more and more. Besides promoting work within particular arts disciplines I think the most interesting thing that we are going to be experimenting with is looking at how the work organizes itself thematically across disciplines. You name an important issue of our time and we've got a collection of artists working on those issues. It's a very different model. I would like to think that we are trying to put out something into the world and as someone who came of age during the sixties and seventies, I think the most exciting thing about those times is that there were so many ideas circulating. There were a lot of alternatives; there were a lot of institutional models. What's saddening to me now is the constriction of this kind of creativity.

**Robert Atkins:** Thank you so much Ruby, the other panelists, and all you in the audience for your attention and participation. See you next week!



## CENSORSHIP IN CAMOUFLAGE PANEL II: THE CENSOR WITHIN

June 11, 2002.

**Svetlana Mintcheva:** Welcome to the panel on self-censorship, the second in a series of two panels organized to celebrate the re-launching of the File Room ([www.thefileroom.org](http://www.thefileroom.org)), an Internet archive of art censorship cases, created by Antoni Muntadas in 1994. The panels were co-organized by Muntadas, the National Coalition Against Censorship and Robert Atkins, a writer and critic who has been working on issues of art-censorship for a very long time.

When we were thinking about these panels we were taking our cue for defining censorship from the wide definition adopted in the File Room, which documents both governmental censorship and market censorship, and remains open to a range of different ways in which expression is repressed. While the legal definition of censorship limits it to government actions, speech is silenced in many other ways. It is the cases of government censorship that get the most visibility. However, there are certain types of censorship that are very hard to make tangible; they remind us that free expression is not solely guaranteed by the absence of restrictions on already existing speech. Obvious instances of repressed speech are only the tip of the iceberg, which includes the structural censorship of who has access to production, funding issues, personal and institutional considerations. In the previous panel on censorship and the marketplace we talked about funding pressures on artistic expression. Today we will

discuss self-censorship and its origins in psychological coercions, institutional considerations, and political pressure. But first I would like to introduce my co-organizers Antoni Muntadas and Robert Atkins.

**Antoni Muntadas:** Last Tuesday I mentioned some personal reasons for starting The File Room. I think that some ways of censoring are not so evident. The title of the panels—*Censorship in Camouflage*—already suggests a hidden mode that's sometimes difficult to define. We are all aware of censorship in the traditional sense, which has been around for centuries. I am referring to image, text, and sound eliminated from the public domain in authoritarian form and for so-called moral rules and reasons. This means that thousands of cases in different cultures appear to be the exercise of power and control in a physically evident and violent way. The goal of these panels is to address the sort of censorship that is present, but difficult to define, because the cases are too subtle, ambiguous and abstract to be called censorship in the traditional way.

We are confronting a situation where the issue is: "Is that censorship?" We need to identify cases and precise experiences in order to discuss them. The fact that certain aspects of repression are not defined, as well as the sophisticated and sometimes invisible strategies that the censors are using makes the situation more subtle and Machiavellian. We, as creators, narrow down the vision of projects in order to adjust to the general guidelines of institutional profiles, funding sources, curators' aesthetics or audience expectations. We need to create a new word for this kind of censorship, in the same way that the word "gentrification" was created and used to define certain way of speculation in real estate where economics and corruption meet. I wonder if we need a new term without

the concept of censorship to locate and address in more progressive ways how power structures are functioning today.

**Svetlana Mintcheva:** A rather utopian suggestion, perhaps—to find a word, which summarizes the current conditions of power visible and invisible. Yet it is truly an urgent task for us to describe how different economic and political factors intersect to put us in our respective places.

**Robert Atkins:** I'm going to speak briefly, I promise. Maybe that new term Antonio suggested isn't so difficult to find. I like "chilling effect," which we hear frequently in legal discourse and Supreme Court decisions. The most effective aspect of last week's panel, I thought, was its open-endedness. It is always important to design these programs—as well as to create art—which is an investigation. Our goal last week was to reveal the economic complexity of the "chilling effect," which only reinforces the status quo or current power relations. Some of the issues that arose last week concerned the fact that we exist in a culture of instability characterized by lots of screaming and lots of polarization. We also live in an amnesiac culture where history is erased. An example that was brought up was CETA—the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, a federal program that in the 70's had an enormous impact on community arts to the tune of \$250 million per year, far more than the budget of the NEA has ever been. We ranged very broadly: We talked about foundations; we talked about lack of interest in the art world as an ecosystem or site of research and development. Ruby Lerner, a very interesting panelist from the Creative Capital Foundation, talked about the lack of interest on the part of foundations in gathering statistics so the status quo could even be considered—conditions which

we, as progressive members of the so-called art community, want to change.

**Svetlana Mintcheva:** I have been thinking a lot about self-censorship, and the more I think about self-censorship the more complicated the issue gets, because it's not only economic, philosophic or ethical, but also a highly political issue. So far, self-censorship remains a subject that has been relatively unexplored. This is perhaps because issues of self-censorship are frequently extremely personal and thus require a lot of courage and honesty to write and talk about. It is easier to write of how government suppresses creativity, or how a writer from the past has censored himself or herself, and much harder to look into one's personal censors. I have had quite a few conversations with artists when they pointed out to me that censorship is far less of a problem than self-censorship. Nevertheless, when I ask for personal examples, the first reflex is to deny self-censorship – until one starts thinking of the choices one has to make in the creative process and all those multiple considerations that more or less consciously are part of it.

The one thing we agree upon when it comes to censorship is that it is bad. In just about every censorship incident I have dealt with those who decide to suppress something deny that they are censoring – instead, they claim to be protecting children or being sensitive to the values and beliefs of adults. In theory, we are all for free speech. Yet we all think there are limits to civilized speech and behavior. The negative connotation censorship carries affects the notion of self-censorship. If censorship is bad, self-censorship is worse. As the German poet, essayist, and publisher Hans Magnus Enzensberger argues, "[s]elf-censorship outruns in elegance and shrewdness everything the most vicious (censor) could imagine. Its target (often

met) is the prohibition to think. Whoever believes that they are immune, is the first victim." The South African writer J. M. Coetzee notes that the interiorization of the figure of the censor into the psychic life of the writer "bring[s] with it humiliation, self-disgust, and shame." Censorship, writes Coetzee, "looks forward to the day when writers will censor themselves and the censor himself can retire."

Both of these accounts assume self-censorship is the interiorization of the repressive voice of the political censor. After September 11, 2001, this type of self-censorship has acquired even more relevance in the United States. In a recent interview with the *Guardian*, Dan Rather said what we all knew but never thought we would hear especially from him, namely, that access to information has been severely limited, and that fear keeps journalists from asking tough questions. A fear that Rather compared to the fear of the flaming tire put around the necks of dissenters in South Africa. Only now the flaming tire is the accusation of anti-patriotism.

It is true that self-censorship most visibly affects people working under repressive political regimes. When it is the interiorized voice of political repression, it indeed paralyzes thought. However self-censorship could also originate in imagining the critical voices of one's friends, in financial woes, psychological struggles, social and ethical concerns, and the need to protect family members, as well as oneself. Questions of what to express and what to repress are issues we all grapple with every day. It could be an issue of "political correctness," of loyalty to one's group, as well as fear of ostracism, fear of not being understood. And, to repeat Enzensberger, "Whoever believes that they are immune, is the first victim."

After September 11, self-censorship has not only been

about the government suppressing information, it has been about sensitivity and appropriateness. True, sensitivity was frequently overzealous, as in the Boston Symphony canceling a production of John Adams' *The Death of Klinghoffer*, or the recent Armory Show exclusion of a work where the attack on the World Trade Center was shown in a computer game context. Yet, being sensitive to the feelings of others is not altogether a bad thing. When does sensitivity begin to stifle? And, anyway, can one ever speak freely? The fact of the matter is, we don't just speak to let something out, we speak to communicate something to others, to affect them in a certain way. Expression is a performative act: It has certain goals. Rather than speaking freely, we speak tactically. Thus when we speak we have to know who we are speaking to and vary what we say accordingly. Language, after the collapse of the tower of Babel, will never be transparent again, what we say is always an approximation of what we mean (or think we mean); worse, in the surrounding noise our expression is further transformed. We have to adjust what we say to get what we want, whether that be money or social change, love or peace.

And then, finally, there is the question of ethics. Photographer Oliviero Toscani (Bennetton commercials designer) recently said in an interview that creativity should be beyond norms, beyond morals. "To think that one has gone too far – that means one has already accepted society's norms. It is already a form of self-censorship." Our concern for ethical principles necessarily constraints us, puts limitations on our freedom to speak. In the far extreme it leads to the absurdities of political correctness gone amok, to a much smaller degree, however, it is what makes life in society relatively livable. But then, the temptation to transgress, the seduction of Milton's Satan is

always there, to remind us of the dangerous freedom that we sacrifice all the time to the civilized comforts of sociability.

Now I would like to introduce our first speaker, Alan Schechner, an artist with a body of work dealing with the Holocaust, recently part of the notorious *Mirroring Evil* show in the Jewish Museum in New York. He works with a range of issues, a lot of them of social and political concern, including memory, obscenity, and the limits of art.

**Alan Schechner:** I must admit that when I first got invited to participate in this panel I went through a long process of trying to psychoanalyze myself for the ways in which I censor my work. I think I did this for a couple of reasons, one was the realization that there was going to be a psychoanalyst on the panel alongside me, and that that kind of analysis would be part of this evening's discussion. The other reason was that I don't think of myself as an artist who self-censors, at least not consciously, if anything I think of myself as the opposite to that, as an artist who often flies in the face of conventions of taste or appropriateness as a way or a strategy for getting over a message. So if this was my image of myself as an artist it was obvious to me that only through psychoanalytical methods could a repressed cause for self-censorship be found. Fortunately for everyone concerned I soon gave this up, but I think the fact that I think of myself as an artist who doesn't self-censor made me really engage with this topic and made me probe deeply into an area I have up to now largely ignored. The reasons for this non-engagement with the issue of self-censorship could be understood on a number of levels: first, the difficulty to define self-censorship; second, the difficulty in either recognizing it or

admitting to it; and third, the fact that I personally have had to deal with issues of outside censorship in relation to my work and thus that is where my focus has been.

I am not sure if the idea for this discussion was hatched prior to the terrible events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, but either way it is impossible not to address these issues of self-censorship without that event casting a large and ominous shadow over this discussion. One of the repercussions of September 11th is that it brought into question one of the basic cornerstones of America's definition of itself. For me as an artist whose work often addresses Holocaust representations, I was hit very early on by the links that were being made between the Holocaust and the attacks on the World Trade Center. This became very apparent to me specifically in relation to some of the attacks on my work from the controversy surrounding the *Mirroring Evil* exhibition at the Jewish Museum. In that exhibition I included a work called *Self Portrait at Buchenwald—It's the Real Thing*, in which I had collaged myself holding a Diet Coke can onto Margaret Bourke-White's famous photograph of a group of survivors of the Buchenwald concentration camp on the day of that camp's liberation in 1945.

Then I read this in the *The Jewish Week*: "'It's the Real Thing' has become a flashpoint for both sides. For a protest planned by Rabbi Zev Friedman of Rambam Mesivta High School in Lawrence, N.Y., one ninth-grader made a sign by removing Schechner's superimposed image from the concentration camp and replacing it by the burning Twin Towers to illustrate the museum's insensitivity to the victims of trauma." (To see these images visit <http://www.theshoah.org/efforts.html>) Other artworks from the exhibition, including Christine Borland's sculptural

installation, which included busts of Josef Mengele, were similarly criticized. Another quote: "Basically, this says the emperor has no clothes," says Menachem Rosensaft, who is a founding chairman of the International Network of Children of Jewish Holocaust Survivors. "They wouldn't think of putting busts of Osama bin Laden at Ground Zero. The museum should tell us what's the difference." This response, which I would argue is largely unconscious, of an instinctive linking of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> to the Holocaust does not stand up to even the most basic historical analysis. The only real linkage that can be made between the two is that in both events innocent people died, but that is true of thousand of other events.

Whatever the historical truthfulness of this linkage, it does symbolize something else and something that is far more ominous for artists working in this country and that is the construction of a moral absolute around September 11th similar to the construction of a moral absolute around the Holocaust. So my first question is: How do artists work under this shadow of moral absolutes? How is this moral absoluteness internalized by artists and in turn how does that effect what it is they may or may not say, and how they may or may not say it?

Because of this linkage, it may be useful to look at some of the discourses surrounding the *Mirroring Evil* exhibit as a way to see how self-censorship is enforced. Michael Kimmelman, in an article in the New York Times that preceded the opening of the show, openly advocated self-censorship. He wrote "Leafing through the catalog [of *Mirroring Evil*], I noticed that, by way of providing bona fides for the art, an essay cites Gerhard Richter, the important German painter. In the 1960's Richter juxtaposed

photographs of tangled corpses from the death camps with pictures clipped from pornographic magazines as part of his vast compendium of scavenged images called "Atlas." The juxtaposition seemed to ask: Where is the line between historical inquiry and obscene gaze? And are Holocaust images respectable pornography? The catalog failed to note, however, that "Atlas" is really a kind of continuing public diary in which Richter reveals the sources that he has contemplated turning into paintings but does not always use. He ultimately declined to use the Holocaust. He decided it would be cheap and obvious."

In other words artistic freedom allows the artist to try things out in the safe and relatively anonymous context of the sketch book, but the moment you go outside of the sketch you become "cheap and obvious" i.e. it is no longer good art. So the role of self-censorship is really, according to Kimmelman, to control the quality of the art. No self-censorship = no quality.

Others were less open in their call for outright censorship in the name of quality, but used another tactic instead, that of context. The art, it was argued in numerous articles and interviews, was in bad taste, but we are not a society that supports open repression of art works. All we ask is that you don't show it here. New York, it was argued, was home to too large a community of Holocaust survivors, and the exhibition of the work would be too painful for them. So here the call to self-censorship was not based on the quality but geography: Do the work, show it if you want, just not here.

The trouble with absolutism is the time and the place are never right. Or at least never right for socially aware and radical political artists. And this is an important point because all images exist in social, political and historical

contexts and as such all images are ideological, they are being used, all the time, and being used for a variety of different agendas whether it be justifying the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, or the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian West Bank, or the invasion of Lebanon etc., etc. And just as Holocaust images are used, the images of Sep 11<sup>th</sup> are being used too. So, for example, it's fine to reference the World Trade Center attacks in a multi-million dollar advertising slot during the Superbowl as long as you reference renewal, rebuilding, the American spirit and the fact that you will overcome. In both cases the message we are getting is very clear: The use of the images is allowed but only for certain agendas.

The deeming of what is and what is not appropriate, the limits of permissibility, apply primarily to politicized images. So for example, prior to September 11<sup>th</sup>, films including terrorist attacks on America, New York City or even the World Trade Center were permissible because they were apolitical. So, on September 10<sup>th</sup> *Die Hard 2* was fine, by September 12<sup>th</sup> however it had become politicized and when something is politicized society sets about limiting that kind of speech. In the same vein we could look at child nudity that was not an issue in Western Art a hundred years ago, but is now and thus a limit is placed on social discourse, including for example the ability to take and process images of your children bathing or running naked around the house. Here is an example where a large segment of the population who do not define themselves as artists choose to self-censor. Similarly cultural conventions in Western culture stop us from taking pictures of our dead. Assuming that I am not in some denial about my ability to bypass or be largely unaffected by the issue of self-censorship, the question that needs to be asked is: How is

it that I feel that I don't self censor, how do I bypass it? I believe that the primary reason I am able to do this by basing my work on and referencing real life events. In *Obscenity Study 3* (<http://dottycommies.com/holocaust03.html>), for instance, I took the famous image of a young boy, hands above his head, being herded out of the Warsaw Ghetto by Nazi soldiers, and manipulated the image so that the boy and one of the Nazi guards overseeing his expulsion appeared naked. In a recent web project called *Jewish antichrist.com* I am asking my audience to submit themselves as possible candidate for the antichrist providing an image and personal details as well as the characteristics they have that make them a suitable applicant for the position. (see [www.jewishantichrist.com](http://www.jewishantichrist.com))

How can I justify these projects, why did not the self-censor inside step in and deem them beyond the pale of public decency and fit only for the sketchbook filed under sick ideas? The answer is I believe that all three examples reference real life events. Because they reference real life events it allows me the latitude to touch on the untouchable talk about the untellable, image the unimaginable. In the referencing of the real I believe the problem of self-censorship is largely bypassed.

Before I finish let me throw at you some of the other questions that came up for me in the process of putting this paper together. What is the difference between self-censorship and editing? My rather simplistic answer is; if the censorship is brought to bear because of politicized content, it is self-censorship, if the editing is about formal issues it is not self-censorship.

What is the difference between self-censorship and strategy? And by strategy I mean either by using a coded

visual language or by choosing when where and to whom to show an image, something that is increasingly difficult in our globally-connected and media-saturated world? Are there times when some kinds of self-censorship work to the advantage of the artist; when the coded/censored language of artworks works better than the uncensored?

I went to art school in the 80's and 90's where an understanding of issues of race, culture, gender and sexual identities was central to my education. Can I as a Jewish man claim the right to talk about the Holocaust in my work? What if I was not Jewish? Could I still talk about it? Can I deal with issues outside of my specific identities as Jewish, male, British, heterosexual whatever? Where is the line between cultural sensitivity, political correctness and self-censorship?

Going back then to where I started on this paper, contemplating psychoanalysis, I would argue that it may be through a process of psychoanalysis that I may uncover ways in which I repress, censor, and edit out elements in my work but that they are largely intangible and of limited importance because in my opinion—and permit me to end on a truism—self-censorship is only important when that which is being censored matters politically.

With thanks to Allesandro Imperato who through a series of discussions help clarify many of the issues in this paper.

**Svetlana Mintcheva:** Thank you, Alan Schechner, for raising all these really important questions – of political enforcement, of self-censorship versus strategic expression, of cultural sensitivity. We will return to these issues in the discussion. And now I would like to introduce Dr. Janice Lieberman, a psychoanalyst in practice in New York, who

has lectured extensively on art and psychology.

**Janice S. Lieberman:** As a psychoanalyst I want to address the *intrapsychic* and ask: What are the conscious and especially unconscious mechanisms that result in self-censorship? How does the artist's psyche anticipate others'—persons' and societies'—reactions and alter and/or omit what might be expressed in its original form in a different context? That is, what goes on within the artist's psyche, what has already been internalized, put in place that results in self-censorship? Is the self-censoring artist like Woody Allen's Zelig—or what we call in my field an "as if" character—whose personality automatically takes on the colors of those around him, like camouflage? George Orwell noted that "circus dogs jump when the trainer cracks his whip, but the really well trained dog is the one that turns his somersault when there is no whip."

I ask: To what extent is the artist aware of his audience when he creates his work? Some may be exquisitely tuned to the body language, to the look in the eye of others and limit themselves to the detriment of their work. Some, on the other hand, may be so narcissistic that they are completely unaware of the other, the other serving merely as a mirror reflecting their own grandiosity. Picasso, for example, was in his personal life completely blunt and insensitive, a character trait that served his art at that particular time. He created what he wanted to without censoring himself. Jackson Pollock similarly was uncaring about the public and created something completely new.

So what goes on inside the psyche that creates self-censorship? And I ask, is self-censorship, conscious or unconscious, deceptive? Is it lying?

Self-censorship is rooted in the use of defense mechanisms. Our everyday defense mechanisms lead us to distort what we think, say or do in order to protect ourselves from facing what is too uncomfortable to face. We deceive ourselves all the time in myriad ways. Unconscious denial or disavowal of what we know or would want to express automatically eliminates thought and actions. Reaction formation is a mechanism that leads us to think or do the very opposite of what we wish to do in order to fight against it. Rationalization and intellectualization enable us to turn more basic and more primitive thoughts and actions into higher-level behaviors that mask their origins. We repress (forget) or suppress (keep under the surface).

We also avoid speaking about or facing certain truths with omissions and lies. In my book, *The Many Faces of Deceit: Omissions, Lies and Disguise in Psychotherapy*, I wrote about omissions on a conscious, preconscious and unconscious level: leaving out what is threatening to the self or to others or just blatantly lying.

All of the above are ways in which artists consciously or unconsciously shape their work. Now I ask: Why are some artists able to rebel and make this rebellion the essence of their art and why do others submit to the social order? I think that this has to do with the unconscious reasons for becoming an artist in the first place. To me, and there are those who will disagree, the artist by definition makes something new and changes and challenges the social order. I think that yielding to the judgments of others reflects a conflict about being an artist. The conflict can be so great that the artist may be blocked in doing his work or to the point that he cannot do his work. His conflicts may be about a fear that any expression will be an expression of

rage, or his conflicts may be about a fear of success and its various symbolic meanings. Or a fear of others' envy, or a fear of exhibiting himself (important sources of why some artists' cannot show or sell their work).

The need for some self-censorship: As a writer myself, I write in order to communicate to others, not just for myself. When I write I am acutely aware of my audience. I want my work to be published and reviewed. I want my books to be purchased. I therefore cannot write everything that is in my head. I also must disguise the identity of my patients who I write about. So I must be adept at a kind of creative deception, which is self-censorship.

Sometimes I should censor myself and due to ignorance as to who my audience will be I do not. For example, a number of years ago I presented a paper on Arshile Gorky and his proclivity to lie. I spoke in passing of his adolescence, in which his family in Armenia were victims of the Turkish genocide, something I had read as a fact in many books about Gorky. I was unaware that a group of Turks acted as watchdogs over all academic references to these historic events. One such person interrupted me at the start in such a way that it was impossible to read the entire paper. In subsequent presentations I decided to censor myself and did not refer to the Turks in this way. This war between the two countries was incidental to my topic and I wanted to talk about it free of this interference.

On the other hand, I quite consciously wrote a negative review of a book by a noted and much revered art critic. I thought it was a nasty and dyspeptic book and said so. I was surprised that the journal editor, a friend of the critic, agreed to publish it. But the art critic then took me on and publicly exposed my lack of advanced degrees in art



history, something I did not enjoy, to say the least. So we choose our battles and our wars.

In my daily work as a psychoanalyst with patients and students I censor myself all the time. It would be quite harmful if I did not. I would not have any patients if I told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The art of my work has to do with timing, tact and dosage of "the truth."

So what about here, at the New School? Let me illustrate what I am talking about. I will not censor myself with the following comments. My reading of you as an audience is that you will disagree with some of what I have to say and I will be unpopular. You will avoid eye contact with me and not want to invite me here again.

I at times feel that certain artworks should not have been made in the first place, for example the photographs Sally Mann took of her naked children. I feel they should not have been sold, shown in public or published. I feel that schoolchildren should not be taken to see certain artworks in museums, works that arouse overwhelming feelings. Some works of Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin come to mind. I found several works in the Jewish Museum's current exhibit *Mirroring Evil* to be not only trivial pieces of art but feel that they perpetuate negative stereotypes about Jews. But, then, I loved the *Sensation* show. I like and have written about Serrano's *Morgue Series*, yet I find his *Sex Series* and *Piss Christ* to be puerile. However, if adult audiences want to look at them, why not?

I imagine that most of you disapproved of the first four sentences and approved of the last two, all honest but inconsistent perhaps from a political point of view. I am

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risking your wrath – would I say what I did in another setting? Am I being aggressive and provocative by not censoring myself or, if punished for my honesty and accurate self-expression, am I being just masochistic?

Is self-censorship lying? It has been said that everyone tells lies all day long. If not people could not get along. Do you think, as Harvard philosopher Sissela Bok wrote, that lying is a deadly virus in our society? David Nyberg wrote an interesting book in 1993 called *The Varnished Truth: Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life*, in which he disagreed with Bok and concluded that it is entirely adaptive to lie.

So I ask more questions than I have answers and look forward to your thoughts on this matter.

**Svetlana Mintcheva:** Thank you Janice Lieberman, for a wonderfully provocative talk, which so well performs the pressures to self-censor. And now I would like to introduce Leeza Ahmady, a curator of Afghani descent.

**Leeza Ahmady:** As a curator and educator, I am glad to be speaking about self-censorship, which I find a real phenomenon of our world and related to what I call the "social program." The "social program" constitutes the ideological, political, economical and psychological behavior of a given society. The reality is that no modern person is divorced from the social group, which is why I think we are all impacted by self-censorship. Our desire to fit in is so profound that our subconscious adheres to self-censorship as a defense mechanism against social alienation.

I would like to use myself as an example when talking about censorship rather than pointing away from myself.

When I immigrated to the US, I was thirteen-years old. I found myself having to adapt to a whole new "social program," a very multi-cultural and multi-linguistic one, which caused me to behave in certain ways. I felt safer telling people that I was Persian. It appeared more acceptable. Possibly because people didn't know too much about it, even though it is a requirement in history classes. It was interesting to say Persian, because it baffled a little, it was more mysterious and abstract.

In college, I was exposed to the idea of identity and culture pride and how that was valuable. I found it safer to say I was from Afghanistan. Furthermore, I indulged in it, because it shocked people who then said, "Oh, I thought you were South American." It was interesting to see their different responses. One of the things I indulged in was the "Third-World-victim" story, telling people how two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, played their game of soccer, using Afghanistan as their bloody field to score goals. That was my rebellious stage.

To come back to the present, when September 11<sup>th</sup> occurred, I really decided I was going to be very positive about this, I was going to be a major example and then I realized that when people would ask me "where are you from?"—and there is all this news about Afghanistan, everyone knows where it is and I couldn't capture the attention with exoticism or mystery—it took me a minute to respond. I would frequently laugh and say, "I am from someplace that is really popular right now," and then wait for their reaction and say, "Afghanistan." I made it OK for myself to finally say where I was from. I teach a dance class of dances from India, Iran, and Afghanistan—after September 11<sup>th</sup>, in my [promotional] e-mails I took Afghan out and put in Persian dance instead. It took me a

few months before I could stop doing that. I decided I could be an example correcting the ideas the media was inculcating about what it meant to be Afghani.

Art as self-expression is not safe from the machinery of the "social program." In fact, it has developed its own. Let's think of the institutionalization of art and its effect on artists in relation to self-censorship. During my practice as an independent curator, I often wondered what is modern art, what is contemporary art, and who says so. My title as a curator gives me the power to select which artists to work with, which means that in the case of my own shows, it is I who decide what art is. Yet, the real haunting question has been: What activates my choices? Working with artists from diverse backgrounds helps to look for a common denominator that connects contemporary artists and I have always been curious about how works are categorized. The common denominator for contemporary artists is that they have been trained to speak the language of art. The language of art spoken by those who study and practice it has been developed by the museum, gallery, or the MFA program here in the West. Artists from diverse parts of the world are compelled to express themselves through a language established in the West in order to be accepted by the establishment.

All these artists around the world have to adhere to a definition of art created in the West. They could express their own cultural sensitivity and political views as long as they fit the Western definition of art, which reigns in the institutions. I will show you the work of an Afghan artist—an installation. Installation art is a form in which artists from around the world feel compelled to work. My personal feeling is that this is because that makes them feel accepted. Installation art is highly celebrated by the art

world. This installation is a carpet made out of rice, carrots and raisins and it is related to the idea of the nomad: The nomad moves from place to place just as this piece can be removed and recreated elsewhere. It is beautiful, both visually and conceptually, but I would like to ask, if this artist had created this work in a village in Afghanistan and not in her studio in Brooklyn what would this work look like? Or what medium would qualify as acceptable if she had no reference to Western contemporary art; if she didn't have access to 300 or so Chelsea galleries? Surely, the materials, the idea of the carpet and the nomad, point to her own cultural background, but we can't really help wondering about the influence of Western education on her idea of art. Can someone who has no notion of installation art accept this work? It is interesting to think about how the institutionalization of art has affected artists and how it makes them self-censor.

**Svetlana Mintcheva:** Thank you Leeza Ahmady for a very interesting presentation, so open about the personal pressures to self-censor. Our last speaker is Charlotta Kotik, a curator of contemporary art in Brooklyn Museum of Art, and also a member of the board of Gotlieb City Foundation for the Arts and adviser on art projects in the Czech Republic.

**Charlotta Kotik:** The history of censorship itself is amazingly interesting, but I am not going to talk about it, because you know about it already. It's one enormous and magnificent power play, which started thousands of years ago and still goes on.

I grew up in Czechoslovakia and went through a very complex maze of censorship. This taught me that censorship and self-censorship could be largely avoided.

Artworks which were done in Czechoslovakia during the years of censorship were very refined and spoke to people in a concealed way, but the message was rather clear and was heard very loudly. Ultimately censorship had led us to a very refined way of expressing our ideas.

After 1989, obviously censorship was largely abolished and different kinds of economic censorship came into power and affected art production and consumption. The attendance of theaters, museums and galleries dropped tremendously, because art was no longer a connection of minds trying to find a way of understanding and transmitting messages. There was no longer a need to express certain ideas in that concealed way. It is very sad to see that people do not create works so much out of an inner necessity and the need for expression but rather for the market, for sale. Money rules. As difficult as it was during the Communist regime, there was a certain purity in those who were trying to express things—money took over with a vengeance and spoiled many things. Nevertheless, during the time of heavy censorship in the 1950's there were many people who were saying "we cannot do this, we cannot do that, it's impossible." Then there were people who could do this and that and could take the consequences. Obviously self-censorship is a very individually differentiated thing. Sometimes I ask myself whether we shouldn't call it "spineless behavior" instead of self-censorship, because I find that one can really do a lot under difficult circumstances. It's a personal choice.

I was in Prague recently. There is currently an exhibition in the Prague Castle called *Politikum*, which claims to be about political art. There was an open call for submissions and they received quite a few submissions both from individual artists and artists' collectives. One of the artists' collectives submitted two proposals—one of them to mount

the inscription "Kunst Macht Frei" ("Art sets you free") on the main gate of the Castle. Obviously this was intended to emulate the "Arbeit Macht Frei," the infamous inscription on the entrances to concentration camps. The other piece they wanted to do was to mount throughout the castle the inscription "Zimmer Frei"—"a room to let," which appears on many houses through the Czech republic wanting to attract visitors from Germany. The inscription also refers to the confiscation of the properties of the ethnic Germans in the Czech Republic after the Second World War. That history is very complex, because the Sudetian land, which was a part of the Czech Republic in prewar times, very early on, in the mid 1930's, proclaimed its total allegiance to Hitler. It was an area, which was used against the Czech Republic and against the rest of Europe as a breeding ground of Nazism. The Czech inhabitants of that particular area had to move out very early, they left all their possessions and were driven out. After the War the German population was asked to leave. Many years later, the descendents of the German population that left are asking for a return of all the properties that had been confiscated or given up.

By bringing attention to this particular political situation, which is brewing on both sides of the border within the Czech and German republics, the artists chose to highlight something very volatile. Nevertheless, they showed only the German aspect. Did they allude to what was happening at the beginning of the War or in the late 30's in those areas? Ultimately, the presentation of the "Zimmer Frei," which was documented by the photos of the decaying houses of the ethnic Germans, was exhibited. "Kunst Macht Frei" was not exhibited, because the office of the President decided not to have this thing and they talked to the artists and tried to make some kind of amendments, nevertheless

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the artists got very upset, because they considered this censorship. In certain ways it was, but I want to pose a question: Is there something like sensitivity to others?

I am myself from a family that was very involved politically prior to, during and after the war. Part of the family died during the war, my husband's Jewish grandfather returned from the concentration camps by a miracle. I was a little uneasy about the Prague exhibition and found that it was verging on propaganda. I think that art has to be more universal; it has to encompass the views of the larger group, not only one group. Because if it becomes one-sided I am afraid it loses universality, which is needed for art to give us new knowledge and new ways of looking at things, and turning into political propaganda, which ultimately cuts the edge of the artistic presentation. So I would like to propose this as a topic for discussion.

**Svetlana Mintcheva:** Thank you, Charlotta Kotik. It certainly appears that the issue of self-censorship, similarly to censorship, is closely related to the question of how we define art. I would now like to open the discussion to questions and comments from the audience.

Excerpts from the discussion:

**Question from the audience:** Leeza Ahmady, I was interested in the shifts of your chosen "identity" as a new immigrant and why you consider that to be self-censorship.

**Leeza Ahmady:** However you put it, this is self-censorship. Afghanistan was pretty popular in the 80's, because it was at war with Russians. But I was thirteen years old and it was not a very fashionable place to say you are from in that age group. There are various things that

we do, because we want to avoid social alienation. And I was trying to fit into this all-new society, and in part what I said was true, because Afghanistan used to be a part of the Persian Empire. At the same time it was not only that—Iranians and Persians are much more established in USA. They are doctors, lawyers, big-businesspeople, especially in Queens and Long Island, they have huge houses. It helped my image. At that time I didn't think about these issues, but if you really want to be honest about it, I think it came down to that.

**Alan Schechner:** I think that concerns the model of strategic self-censorship. And I can think here of an example in which working within the realms of self-censorship in a strategic way actually worked to the advantage of the artist. In Israel representations of the Palestinian Flag in public are forbidden. The Palestinian Flag is red, green, black, and white. A Palestinian artist, trying to bypass this external censorship, painted watermelons that are also red, green, black and white. These images were still banned by the Israeli authorities but in the process the artists revealed the shortsighted stupidity of the Israeli ban. By censoring himself he revealed the idiocy of external censorship. There's a strategic element, which can be sometimes utilized.

**Robert Atkins:** Alan, when you spoke of self-censorship you created the illusion that we are free agents. However—and I don't know about you, Janice, but both Charlotta and Alan are representatives of institutions—I can't believe that you never had a student come to you demanding an A, Alan, and that you never stopped yourself from saying what first came to your mind. And Charlotta, what happened with you at the Brooklyn Museum, in terms of *Sensation* and other controversial exhibitions you've

been involved with. In other words, I'm curious about the place of compromise in our interfaces with institutions.

**Charlotta Kotik:** Once you work in the institution you compromise by the simple fact that you work in the institution. It is just part of the game. The question is how deeply you want to go compromising yourself, because I still feel that there are ways to be honest about the things. You just have to take consequences, which sometimes are not very pleasant. It does not mean that you lie, which I find to be unacceptable.

**Alan Schechner:** I was not thinking about teaching, in relation to teaching there is a different agenda. I am dealing with different museums and galleries, and they obviously have their own agendas. The stuff that comes out for me out of that is where self-censorship ends and editing begins. Or what the distinction is between self-censorship and making strategic decisions. And again it seems to me it's all about politics, for me anyway. So if I censor something, because I feel the content is too political, then that would be self-censorship and that is what I didn't find myself doing. If I did something to fit into the context of a certain museum or their agendas or slightly tweak something, maybe formally, but don't compromise the message, that would be acceptable to me.

**Question from the audience:** There is an issue raised—always when it comes to artistic representation—of the tension between presentation—of self, ethnicity, gender—and *re*-presentation. Then there are the gatekeepers, the museum or the market, deciding what is acceptable. The idea that art has to be universal should be considered in that context. This idea belongs to a particular moment of time and itself is a kind of unacknowledged

method of censorship: It suggests that things, which emanate from particular viewpoints, are somehow less legitimate or that somehow they are propagandistic.

**Charlotta Kotik:** I think things always emanate from a certain viewpoint. But I think that viewpoint should be balanced, and I think that is where exhibition design or gate-keeping comes into play: You choose that work and you show it, but you also explain. What was interesting in the Prague exhibition was that there was a review in the *Prague Post*, the English paper there, saying that it would have been great if the works were put into context and there were labels explaining them, because it was basically conceptual art. I think the point of view expressed with "Zimmer Frei" was totally legitimate at that point in history. Nevertheless, it would have been very good also to know what the work was a response to and how the whole problem came into being.

**Question from the audience:** It is strange and disturbing how the Brooklyn museum handled its single most political show in a long time – the Leon Golub show. That show had very low-key publicity and it was the only show to not even have a banner. That I consider an instance of institutional self-censorship.

**Charlotta Kotik:** I have to say that we were struggling financially so much during the show, that we simply didn't have the money. You might say that was a choice and it is true that choices are always made. It would have been great to have a banner. We desperately tried to raise more money for the publicity, but unfortunately certain things just went undone.

**Question from the audience:** Isn't there also a

dimension of self-censorship that is legitimate self-protection or protection of others?

**Svetlana Mintcheva:** From a certain perspective we all self-censor: Whatever we say, we cannot speak freely. And then there are degrees. Am I saying all that always comes to me? No, because I want to get certain results, speaking all that I want to say could very well undermine these results. We speak tactically, not freely. It's not about something that is inside erupting outside; it is about me interacting with the world, trying to get something done.

**Question from the audience:** How would we make the distinction between editing and self-censorship? Editing is not necessarily self-censorship. To me censorship implies the imposition of something from the outside, a reaction of fear.

**Leeza Ahmady:** I discovered in myself that it is both external forces and how you digest them and how they sit in your internal context. And I do think that truly if you look within yourself, you can distinguish when you are editing and when you are not, when it's actual self-censorship. I don't think it's a mysterious thing to tell the difference.

**Question from the audience:** I am curious about Alan Schechner's piece in terms of the commercialization and exploitation of the Holocaust.

**Alan Schechner:** I think that brings up interesting issues about cultural ownership in terms of censorship. Is it OK for me as a Jewish man to use those images? Because growing up I assumed that they were mine, that they belonged to me and initially I didn't think twice.

When I was serving in the Israeli army I became very much aware of the uses to which the Holocaust was put. The Israeli Prime Minister made a speech in which he said, "We have to attack Lebanon, because if we don't attack Lebanon, it's going to be another Treblinka." And I became very aware of how the Holocaust is being used and manipulated for political reasons. The act of me going in and placing myself inside the image was trying to make that manipulation explicit. One of the interesting things for me is that within the museum that was not talked about, within the catalogue this was not talked about, because the Jewish Museum is uncomfortable with talking about the Jewish occupation of the Palestine and the Lebanon War. I have my explanation of what the image is about, and the museum had its own agenda and that agenda didn't fit into mine. There were divisions within the institution. Initially the idea was to move forward in a certain way, but then the board of the trustees put pressure on the director. The internal politics of the institution muddled the message of the exhibition. I was out of the exhibition for a little while, then I was in a corridor, and then they brought me back in and turned me against the wall for a while. There were all these warnings. And that's where the censorship happened.

**Svetlana Mintcheva:** Thank you, Alan, thanks to Sondra Ferganis and the Vera List Center for Art and Politics for hosting this discussion, and thank you all for coming. I hope we will continue our conversation online or in other forms. As Robert Atkins pointed out earlier tonight, the most effective aspect of last week's panel was its open-endedness. I am certain the questions raised tonight will stay with us and provoke many future conversations.