

Risky Business: Fessing Up to Perversion

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(Delivered at the Western Regional SPE Conference on Voyeurism, UC Santa Barbara, 2000)

Catalogue description: When does looking at someone become voyeuristic? Can listening to someone's confession of a culturally reprehensible act be voyeuristic as well? In the tape to be screened for this presentation, "Steven X and Barbara C," the viewer takes up a position somewhere between witness, confidant, and voyeur. Exposed to two socially unacceptable actions - a pedophilic encounter and the betrayal of the supposed pedophile by the artist - the spectator is asked to consider which is more pernicious. Voyeurism is an ambiguous word - where is the allure located - in the nature of the object, the eye of the beholder, or a culture which promotes mythologies of desire?

Caveat: I assume everyone here has read the conference statement about this presentation so you know the video addresses a sexual encounter between a young girl and a middle aged man, usually termed pedophilia. I should also say that the video contains sexually explicit language and if you're offended by that, you will be offended by this tape. If this is the case I ask that you leave now. If you don't leave now, please do not leave before the end of the presentation. The tape is 18 minutes after which I will deliver some prepared remarks followed by discussion.

The idea of childhood is a construction of the enlightenment, of the later half of the 18th century, of a time when mortality rates declined enough for parents to make more of an emotional investment in each of their children. The image of the romantic child appeared during this period but the image was haunted by death and loss.

The 20th century idealized notion of romantic childhood is no less saturated with loss - loss of innocence more than a loss of life. Anyone who has been around children for any length of time realizes that what is called innocence is very short lived. Children are a *memento mori* - reminders of the swift passage of time toward death. Which is perhaps what makes them such desirable subjects for our gaze. Adolescents straddle the line between being a child and being an adult - a point of no return. Too old for some things, almost old enough for other things.

The prevailing view is that "children" shouldn't "have sex." What is meant by "children" and what is meant by "having sex"? Should childhood be defined by civil law that indicates the legal age at which a person may engage in sexual intercourse and is that what constitutes "having sex"? In the United States this age, referred to as the "age of consent," varies widely among states? These ages range from a low of 12 in Delaware to 18 in many states. Or does childhood end when a person can legally buy and consume alcohol, which also varies state to state and does not necessarily coincide with the age of consent. Or does a person become an adult when he can drive, vote or marry? These ages, also, do not necessarily coincide in any state, much less among the states.

An arbitrary line is drawn to separate childhood from adulthood.

The age thresholds just mentioned are legal boundaries. Biological and psychological ages are dismissed and everyone is squeezed into an arbitrarily defined category that distinguishes those who are supposedly too immature to make decisions for themselves from those who legally can, despite their level of maturity. Biologically, children become sexual adults at puberty. In states where the age of consent is quite low, puberty and legal age roughly coincide, but these states are in the minority.

And what does "having sex" mean? In the popular mind it probably means engaging in sexual intercourse. (By the way, civil and criminal laws do not use the popular term "having sex," but instead refer to "sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual contact.") What about these "other forms" of "sexual contact"? State laws discuss such things as oral sex (still illegal even for adults in many states) and mere "touching" of the genitals or breasts in terms of punishable sexual offenses when "children" are involved. Some of these provisions differ depending on whether one person is a legal adult or not. Do these other kinds of contact, which can be very erotically pleasing or even produce orgasms, qualify as "having sex"?

Whenever a young girl is sexually precocious, it is assumed that she was molested or sexually abused; never that she's exerting personal agency or free will. What kind of girl

does these things? She's either a victim or trash. This is a culture that refuses to think of children as sexual beings. It's better to blame child/adolescent sexuality on an instance of child molestation or abuse than to entertain the idea that children are interested in, curious about, or may even like sex.

Jocelyn Elders was relieved of her position because she was bold enough and honest enough to say the safest sex is self pleasure – masturbation. Her mistake, the risk she took was that she made a public acknowledgement that children are sexual.

Masturbation is a safe outlet for the sexual urges of children and adolescents just as it is for adults. Parents and legal authorities pontificate about protecting children but can't bear the thought of sex education. All the rhetoric of protection in the world isn't going to stop real child abuse, molestation or rape. The only way to protect kids is to give them the information they need to make reasonable choices for themselves.

The abuse and molestation obsession of current culture adds dramatically to the fears of adults in touching children, even their own, and the fears of children in being touched. We have reached a point where parents and adults have been brainwashed to think of themselves as perverted if they are very physically intimate with preadolescent and adolescent children, especially of the opposite sex, even when such physical contact can't reasonably be construed as sexual.

It is acceptable to display shocking degrees of violence to children, including movies, violent war games and violent sports such as boxing or hockey, but it is not acceptable to allow them to see sexually explicit motion pictures, to display physical affection towards them in public or talk explicitly to them about sex.

There is no clinical evidence that observing the sexual activity of others is in any way harmful to children, especially when it is explained to very young ones as not being an act of violence or pain. Healthy

curiosity, even fascination and then acceptance is the usual reaction. Some evidence also indicates that some sex offenders have received little or no sex information as children and have been exposed to little or no sexually explicit materials. This is exactly the opposite situation to that claimed by some conservatives who crusade against sex education, pornography and sex in the media.

So who claims truth?

Most people make the assumption that all sexual experience at a young age results in life long damage to the child. Telling a child or adolescent she or he is a victim can make it so. Language is a very powerful thing. The language of psychology and the law creates victimization and the victim much more so than many sexual experiences themselves. This is not to minimize in any way the personal trauma of real child molestation and abuse, but to say that personal trauma is not the only outcome of a sexual encounter, intergenerational or with kids of similar ages. Sexual activity and sexual abuse of children should not be equated. One does not equal the other.

The myth of female passivity and victimization vs. male aggressiveness and abuse must also be challenged. There is a perverse moral prestige in being a victim. Women and children are still the righteous oppressed when speaking of violence and abuse. Panic button issues like rape and child molestation invite fear rather than critical thought. As Gayle Rubin has observed, "for over a century, no tactic for stirring up erotic hysteria has been as reliable as the appeal to protect children."

Just when you think America's obsession with sheltering children from sexuality can't go any further, it does. The House Judiciary Committee is now considering HR 5045, which would allow a citizen to sue if a minor is exposed to an entertainment product containing material judged harmful to minors. There's no requirement of actual damage to an actual child--just a belief that the minor is "likely" to suffer damage.

One of the most troubling aspects of American law is the assumption that sexual words, images, and ideas are inherently dangerous to children and others of questionable

competence . There is NO proof of this, despite attempts by several Presidential commissions and other organizations to find it. On the contrary, it seems obvious that the message repressive policies give kids is that sex is bad, sexual feelings are bad, and if they engage in it and are excited by it, THEY are bad.

Believing that eroticism is dangerous for kids is a way of avoiding feelings about one's own sexuality. What do books that are banned from certain school districts trigger in people that makes them think it's dangerous for others? In their minds, every form of speech to which they object is obscene.

Let me return to the video:

Is the story so compelling that a pedophile would find it titillating? If I speculate that in certain circumstances a situation like this may not be a terrible thing, am I aiding an abuser? Am I giving someone who has only thought about such a thing the invitation to literalize the fantasy? These are all questions that have been asked about this tape as well as questions I ask myself. Am I creating a locus for fantasy or action in someone who had never even thought about it before?

There should be no subject related to humanness that is off limits for public discourse. Ideas thought to be dangerous require discussion not avoidance.

This is not a visual piece of work. The visuals are created individually in the imagination. But as a listener, you are no less required to engage in an act of voyeurism, the safe and second hand experiencing of, or perhaps identification with, taboo behavior. As a viewer you are witness to three occurrences:

- the telling of a young girl's sexual history and her subsequent manipulation and sexual control of Steven,
- a sexual encounter between an under aged girl and a 40 year old man, which is punishable by incarceration,
- and an action on my part that constitutes the breaking of a legally binding agreement as well as a betrayal of a confidence.

Every screening of this tape has produced laughter at the point where I promise to hide his identity. Most think it's deserved punishment for what he's done.

Responsibility has always been an important issue in my teaching. But my attitude and ideas about it have change greatly. I still feel we all have responsibilities as artists, but over the past 10 years, my motives, strategies and end results have been reoriented. As an artist my responsibilities are to be accountable for my ideas, to have a clear understanding of what I'm doing, and to voice what is unthinkable in American culture. A look at what is unthinkable will uncover a culture's deepest anxieties. Pornography does that better than any other social form of expression. No subject is taboo, nothing is sacred. I respect opinions that are different from my own and to engage in arguments about the issues is what ultimately drives the work. What I can't tolerate and what shouldn't be tolerated in an organization such as SPE is an unwillingness to entertain a dialogue on what are perceived as dangerous ideas.

Liam Gillick has written "the role of the artist is not to offer us back what we already know, but to work away on our behalf towards the creation of a new set of images and objects that completely reorder the way we look at the world."

After being asked to be a keynote speaker at this conference and negotiating an honorarium, I was asked to submit a short abstract for the conference agenda. Several days after I submitted the abstract I was informed that the invitation was being withdrawn because board members felt there would be no interest in the subject. There was also the suggestion that some were offended because they were parents and they didn't want to alienate the membership. When my anger subsided, I proposed to come to the conference without honorarium and present the work. This request was also denied. A week later I received a call informing me that the board had rethought the decision and was willing to let me present but without honorarium. I am now speaking in the same 2pm Sunday slot I would have occupied as a keynote speaker.

The honorarium isn't the issue here. The issue is that a small number of people without ever seeing the tape had decided it was inappropriate for the rest of you to see in a conference on voyeurism. This is an ironic instance of the art world imitating the real world, and I can only laugh at the absurdity.

Obviously this is not an instance of censorship per se; I've shown the tape and talked about the issues. What needs to be challenged is how and on what basis decisions are made in this organization. Who makes the decisions for what you can and can't see. If controversial subjects can't be discussed in an academic environment where can they be discussed?

I will end with a few quotes:

“Intellectual Freedom is the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored. Intellectual freedom encompasses the freedom to hold, receive and disseminate ideas.” — Intellectual Freedom and Censorship Q & A

In the process of acquiring knowledge and searching for truth, students can learn to discriminate—to make decisions rationally and logically in light of the evidence. By suppressing materials containing ideas or themes with which they do not agree, censors produce a sterile conformity and a lack of intellectual and emotional growth of students.”—Censorship in the Schools: What Is It?

How Do You Cope?

“Restriction of free thought and free speech is the most dangerous of all subversions. It is the one un-American act that could most easily defeat us.”—Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas

“Art is made at the frontier between self and the world, and in the act of creation that frontier softens, becomes permeable, allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist into the world. Nothing so inexact, so easily and frequently misconceived, deserves the protection of being declared sacrosanct. We shall just have to get along without the shield of sacrilization, and a good thing, too. We must not become what we oppose. The only privilege art deserves - and this privilege it requires in order to exist - is the privilege of being the arena of discourse, the place where the struggle of language (*and parenthetically, “image”*) can be acted out.”
Salman Rushdie